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***Battling for History:
Divisive and Unifying Figures of the Salvadoran Civil War***

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Honors Thesis
Sociology Department
Oberlin College
Spring, 2011***

Dedico este proyecto a todos...
*"...los que apenas pudieron regresar,
los que tuvieron un poco más de suerte,
los eternos indocumentados,
los hacelotodo, los vendelotodo, los comelotodo,
los primeros en sacar el cuchillo,
los tristes más tristes del mundo,
mis compatriotas,
mis hermanos."*

-“Poema de Amor” por Roque Dalton

Special thanks my advisors, Prof. Veljko Vujacic, Prof. Daphne John, Prof. Sebastiaan Faber,
and Prof. Steve Volk for all your academic and personal support.

I dedicate this project to my family, especially my mother Ann Robison, my father Douglas
Farah, and my step-mother Leslie Bumstead for all your love, input, and encouragement
throughout this long process.

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Introduction

Societies that undergo civil armed conflict and remain one state must come to terms with a history that has impacted the nation as a whole. Unlike wars fought on foreign soil, civil wars are deeply traumatic to the national group identity and inherently fracture the nation. In cases that have a decisive victor (such as Franco after the Spanish civil war, or Pinochet after Chile's internal strife) the winners have the privilege of constructing, communicating, and enforcing a narrative of the conflict. This historical narrative often does not acknowledge the experiences of the vanquished, and enforces an artificial consensus that does not allow for true reconciliation or national healing.

But what happens in a case where the peace is brokered, and all sides are recognized as re-constructors of civil society? El Salvador's peace accord, brokered by the United Nations, stipulated that all forces would disarm and that the FMLN guerrilla organization would become a political party. No one was declared a victor, and all sides were equal partners in the development of a democratic post-war society. Because of this inclusive approach to establishing peace, many sectors of society were involved in the process. Though everyone was left somewhat unsatisfied with the provisions of the accord, the long and arduous peace process did lead to an opening of society with the warring factions left somewhat intact. Today the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) and *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista de El Salvador* (ARENA) political parties continue to fight for their goals through political means.

Unlike the Spanish or Chilean cases where a narrative of history was imposed, no one Salvadoran group was entitled to the privilege of writing history. For this reason, multiple narratives of the conflict still exist and are perpetuated by political parties, institutions, and

private groups who vie for eventual recognition in official history. Nearly 20 years after the end of the conflict, the tension over history is salient and can be seen in the various articulations and attempts to preserve competing narratives of the war, particularly through monuments and museums, discussed here as “sites of memory.”

I argue that the manner in which the conflict ended allowed for a unique historical process to begin that allows for particular moments and historical figures to be remembered and mythologized, either in a polarizing or a unifying way. Some events and historical people are understood in multiple, competing ways that show no sign of a possible reconciliation, while others are gradually emerging as the possible beginnings of a unified national narrative about the civil conflict. This process can be seen particularly in the claiming of public spaces, through monuments, memorials, street names, and commemorative events that either foster partisanship or attempt to bring Salvadoran society together.

In my thesis, I will first discuss two figures that are irreconcilably polarizing (Chapter 2), followed by a discussion of two figures who show the potential to unify the nation (Chapter 3). Each section will examine how these figures exemplify either the enduring fracturization or emerging unification of Salvadoran society. I examine the narratives surrounding these war-time figures to understand the degree to which their mythologies are consistent or divergent. Do people from across the political spectrum describe them in the same way? If not, what sorts of parallel narratives exist, and can these be attributed to political differences? And finally, is there hope that someday a unified and unifying historical narrative will emerge to help future generations make sense of their violent history? Each of the four examples discussed here has undergone a process of mythification by various sectors of society in the nineteen years since the end of the war, with different results at the present time. What they have in common is that they

reside in the collective Salvadoran memory, and are invoked for the purposes of present-day politicians, religious leaders, and military officials (as well as everyday folks) to make sense of the internal violence that ended fewer than two decades ago.

In Chapter 2, I will address polarizing narratives of history as exemplified by the competing mythologies surrounding Colonel Domingo Monterrosa (1940-1984) and Major Roberto D'Aubuisson (1944-1992). Though there are undoubtedly other moments and people about whom competing narratives are constructed and proliferated in El Salvador, these two emerged in my research as salient examples of people who are too important to be forgotten, but too polarizing to be reconciled.

Chapter 3 discusses two examples of potentially unifying people: the unifying mythology of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (1917-1980) and the tumultuous but increasingly accepted mythology surrounding the recently deceased FMLN commander and politician, Schafik Jorge Handal (1930-2006). Though of course there are critics of these examples, I argue that there are few other figures that are emerging as possible bridges of reconciliation and understanding. Overall, Salvadoran society is still deeply fractured, but these examples offer a glimpse of what could lie ahead as the conflict drifts further into the past.

Chapter 1

Background Information: History, Theory, and Methods

History

During the 1980s, the armed conflict in El Salvador turned the international spotlight on one of the world's smallest nations, a country long characterized by violent uprisings and military repression. The Salvadoran Civil War, which, by most accounts, lasted from 1980 until 1992, was the culmination of more than a century of acute social and economic inequality. In El Salvador, the structures of power put in place during its time as a Spanish colony hardly changed for centuries. Land and wealth were concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy families, commonly referred to as the *oligarquía* (oligarchy), who privatized collective indigenous land in order to construct a semi-feudal coffee empire beginning in the late 1880s. Though the specific practices utilized to ensure social and economic hegemony of landholders (mostly of European descent), inequality rooted in the colonial social structure “was perpetrated well into the twentieth century by the landed oligarchy, with the assistance of the military.”¹ A series of military dictatorships with close ties to these ruling families maintained order and met opposition with severe repression and violence for over a century.

Between independence and the 1880s, indigenous people had, on the whole, maintained control over communal land. In the 1860s and -70s, the government had even formalized community land management, calling these lands “ejidos,” and documenting their locations. It was only at the end of this century that the government developed stricter property laws in order to shift towards a system that privileged private property, specifically for coffee growers. In

¹ Richard A. Haggerty, “Historical Setting,” in *El Salvador: A Country Study*, ed. Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress (Washington, DC: United States Government, 1990), 11.

1881, communal lands were “exterminated” through a legislative decree.² Some of the indigenous people were given small parcels of land by the government in exchange for their labor on the ever-expanding coffee plantations, while others were forced north to less arable land, or to cities to look for work in industrial sectors. This led to the phenomenon of internal seasonal migration, fueled by those *campesinos* who could just barely subsist on their parcels of land, and had to work on plantations during planting and harvesting seasons in order to make ends meet. This allowed coffee to dominate the market further, and by the turn of the twentieth century, it made up 76% of El Salvador’s exports.³ The coffee industry propelled an oligarchy composed of a handful of families into positions as players in the global economic system. This group of landowners is popularly referred to in El Salvador as the “fourteen families,” (as I saw repeatedly in my interviews), though the actual number of powerful families was closer to thirty.⁴ This ruling class developed at the expense of the millions who worked the land. Rural peasants, or *campesinos*, worked for a modern equivalent of 50 cents a day under harsh conditions and without the possibility of upward mobility.⁵

This pattern of land distribution, termed a “system of exclusion” by L.M. Ladutke,⁶ prevailed for the next hundred years. The displaced and undermined indigenous and *mestizo* (mixed-race) communities continued to be exploited, while the military and the government preserved and protected the coffee-growers’ economic interests. Between the 1880s and 1970s, an unprecedented alliance developed between the landholding oligarchy, the political elite, and

² Spanish, Ministerio de Educación, *Historia de El Salvador: Tomo II* (San Salvador: Comisión Nacional de los Libros de Texto Gratuitos, 1994), 11.

³ Spanish, Michael Krämer, *El Salvador: Unicornio de la Memoria* (San Salvador: Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen, 1998), 19-21.

⁴ Spanish, Film. 1932: *Cicatriz de la memoria*.

⁵ Spanish, Film. 1932: *Cicatriz de la memoria*.

⁶ L.M. Ladutke, *Freedom of Expression in El Salvador: The Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004).

the military. These three institutions crystallized their grip on power through intermarriage and routinely exhibited forceful action as the means of upholding the status quo.⁷

The only meaningful challenge to the dominant power structure came in January of 1932 when the worldwide economic depression of the early 1930s drove down coffee prices by 54% and “privation among the rural labor force, long a tolerated fact of life, sank to previously unknown depths.”⁸ As the standard of living plummeted among the working class in the early 1930s, the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCES) began to garner support, thanks to a network of university students and leaders of various agricultural communities. With coffee prices at an all-time low and land reform further out of reach than ever before, leaders of the Communist Party covertly organized a uprising of coffee workers. Across the main coffee-growing regions, hundreds of coffee workers under the leadership of Farabundo Martí, Feliciano Ama and others raided barracks and took up arms to in the name of revolution.⁹ In response to this armed revolt, the government of General Martínez Hernández sent out the National Guard, and with the help of local militias put down the rebellion. Within three days the armed forces had achieved their goal, but at the human cost of between 10,000 and 30,000 lives, nearly all of these indigenous males.¹⁰ Richard A. Haggerty describes the legacy of silence that resulted from the massacre:

No matter what figure one accepts, the reprisals were highly disproportionate to the effects of the communist-inspired insurgency, which produced no more than thirty civilian fatalities. The widespread executions of *campesinos*, mainly Indians, apparently were intended to demonstrate to the rural population that the military was now in control... and the memory of *la matanza* would linger over Salvadoran political life for decades, deterring dissent and maintaining a sort of coerced conformity.¹¹

⁷ Jeffrey M. Paige, “Coffee and Power in El Salvador.” *Latin American Research Review* 28:3 (1993): 9.

⁸ Country Study, 14.

⁹ Spanish. Equipo de Educación MAIZ, *Historia de El Salvador: de Como los Guanacos no Sucumbieron a los Infames Ultrajes de Españoles, Criollos, Gringos y otras Plagas* (San Salvador: Algier’s Impresores, 1995), 82-83.

¹⁰ Ministerio de Educación, 134.

¹¹ Haggerty, 16.

Though this event happened decades before the Salvadoran civil war broke out, it is an important precursor to the armed conflict because it was the nation's most dramatic example of the lengths to which the ruling classes would go to preserve their absolute dominance. The silencing of these voices served as a strong warning that resistance would be met by mass coercion and repression. This fostered a culture of fear and silence that resulted in three decades of stable military dictatorship.

During the 1970s, the agitation for land reform and for fair elections mobilized increasing numbers of the population to take part in protests, boycotts, and other (usually) non-violent means of resistance.¹² Because of widespread poverty and growing discontent, the ruling class organized elections in 1972, but these were fraudulent, and did little to appease popular disillusionment. As White describes: "El Salvador's dance with democracy ended in 1972 with the stolen elections that maintained power in the hands of the elites while further marginalizing the poor majority as well as most reformers."¹³

The 1960s and 1970s were also a crucial time in the history of the Catholic Church, both internationally and within El Salvador. It was a time of sweeping changes that recognized the importance of marginalized communities, such as the Vatican II conference, and the promotion of Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology interpreted the gospel through the lens of preferential treatment for the poor. In the Catholic Church across Latin America, clergy and lay people alike "began to take their social mission seriously: lay persons committed themselves to work among the poor, charismatic bishops and priests encouraged the calls for progress and

¹² Rex A. Hudson, "National Security" in *El Salvador: A Country Study*, ed. Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress (Washington, DC: United States Government, 1990), 239.

¹³ Christopher M. White, *The History of El Salvador* (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), 80.

national modernization.”¹⁴ In El Salvador, the progressive or liberationist wing of the Catholic Church began establishing *Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base* (Christian Base Communities or CEBs). This network of grassroots organizations aimed to awaken and nurture class consciousness and activism among El Salvador’s marginalized people by preaching Biblical preference for the poor.¹⁵

Efforts to educate and organize the masses incurred the wrath of the ruling class in the form of unofficial repression from the right-wing militias, otherwise known as the “death squads.” These groups were apparently supported financially by the oligarchy and drew on active-duty and former military personnel for their members. The squads assassinated targeted clergy members, activists, and other “subversives” in an effort to discourage further anti-government activities and to deter potential expansion of the ranks of the mass organizations and other protest groups.¹⁶

The ongoing repression also sparked the formation of armed revolutionary guerrilla groups that split off from the Communist Party (PCES). The PCES had existed clandestinely since the 1932 massacre, and stood for worker’s rights and the eradication of poverty. However, in the 1970s the PCES was advocating for a peaceful, democratic route to reform via democratic politics, not armed insurgency, and various groups began to break off from each other in pursuit of revolution. The largest of these were the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) and the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* (FPL). Over time, other smaller organizations also splintered off from the FPL and the ERP: the *Fuerzas Armadas de Resistencia Nacional* (RN), and the

¹⁴ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *A Concise History of Liberation Theology* <http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm> (October 23, 2010).

¹⁵ Haggerty, 31.

¹⁶ Haggerty, 32.

Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC).¹⁷ The guerrilla groups began terrorist-style activities such as planting bombs in government buildings, and galvanized young people to join *la lucha*.

Inspired by the 1979 Sandinista victory in neighboring Nicaragua, Cuban leader Fidel Castro urged reconciliation between the four armed groups and the Communist Party, and organized talks in Havana. In 1980, the four main revolutionary factions (ERP, FPL, FARN, and PRTC), as well as the PCES, joined forces to form the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN).¹⁸ They named their organization after Farabundo Martí, the most prominent leader of the 1932 coffee worker revolt. In doing so, the leaders of the FMLN invoked the historical memory of a traumatic event and recast it as the first battle in their armed revolution. Though these organizations promoted different leftist frameworks and ideas about what guerrilla tactics would work best, they united in the face of common enemies: the weakened state, the coffee oligarchy, and the emboldened military, which more often than not protected the interests of the oligarchy rather than the state.

The cycle of violence and repression escalated and reached a dramatic apex in March 1980 with the assassination of the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Romero, who had been selected as archbishop in part because of his moderate political views, was influenced strongly by the liberation theology movement, and he was appalled by the brutality employed with increasing frequency by government forces against the populace and particularly against clergy. In his weekly radio homilies, he related statistics on political assassination and excesses committed by the military. He frequently urged soldiers to refuse to carry out what he characterized as immoral orders. His high profile made him an important political figure, and he

¹⁷ Hudson, 237-239.

¹⁸ Hudson, 237.

used his influence to argue against United States military aid to El Salvador. Despite his stature as the country's primary Catholic leader, he was targeted for assassination; all factors indicate that the killing was carried out by members of the right-wing death squads, and was most likely ordered by prominent politician and military officer Major Roberto d'Aubuisson.¹⁹ However, the case was never fully investigated or conclusively solved.

The conflict escalated into a full-fledged civil war once the FMLN became a unified entity, and launched an offensive in the capital in January 1981. Though the FMLN offensive failed on several fronts, they retained certain military strongholds and focused increasing international attention on El Salvador. That same year they managed to assemble the resources to launch a guerrilla radio station, *Radio Venceremos*, from the mountains of the department of Morazán, and broadcast nationally to galvanize support. They used a variety of guerrilla strategies from destroying infrastructure, to kidnapping foreign businessmen and local politicians, and fighting in the most geographically difficult regions of El Salvador.²⁰

On the other side, the United States gradually invested more and more into counter-insurgency efforts and, by the height of the war, was providing more than a million dollars a day in military and economic aid to El Salvador's government, as well as military training and technology. The U.S. leadership saw the conflicts in Central America as the front line of the Cold War, and spared no available expense. Since both Cuba and Nicaragua openly backed the FMLN, the Reagan Administration considered the Salvadoran guerrilla movement to be part of the expanding threat of Communism in Latin America.²¹ U.S. aid effectively prolonged the war and embarrassed both the American and Salvadoran militaries, since the armed forces far

¹⁹ John Pike, *El Salvador: Civil War* <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/elsalvador2.htm> (November 20, 2010).

²⁰ Hudson, 239.

²¹ Haggerty, 42.

exceeded the guerrillas in both training and technology, but were not able to win a military victory.

Also, by 1981, Salvadoran conservatives had become so dissatisfied with the existing parties that they created a new one, under the leadership of Major Roberto d'Aubuisson. They called it the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista de El Salvador*, (Nationalist Republican Alliance of El Salvador, or ARENA).²² Though presidential, municipal, and congressional elections took place at different times during the war, they were affected by fraud and voter boycotts, and thus are not often credited as being fair or representative. However, ARENA as a party survived the war, and had its presidential candidates elected in four consecutive elections (1989, 1994, 1999, and 2004) that were internationally recognized as fair and free.

During the conflict more than 70,000 people were killed or disappeared, and the public demand for a resolution to the conflict escalated in 1989 with the launch of the final FMLN offensive in November, in which the guerrillas won over new strongholds in the capital city of San Salvador. During the offensive, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered in the middle of the night at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas. At first, the government and military blamed their deaths on the FMLN. However, international investigations revealed that indeed the priests, five of them of Spanish origin, were assassinated by the elite Atlacatl military battalion during the offensive.²³ Their murders not only increased pressure within El Salvador for a resolution to the conflict, but also mounted additional international pressure to cease the violence and end human rights abuses, particularly those inflicted on foreign nationals.

²² *Historia del Mayor Roberto d'Aubuisson*, <http://www.arena.org.sv/historia.php> (December 1, 2010).

²³ For more information about the final offensive and the massacre of the priests, please refer to the book, *Paying the price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the murdered Jesuits of El Salvador* by Teresa Whitfield (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

For the next three years, the United Nations brokered negotiations between the FMLN leadership, the government and the military, and on January 16, 1992 the Chapultepec accords were signed. Its main stipulations included a 70% reduction and repurposing of the armed forces, the formation of completely new civilian police force, legal amnesty for war related crimes, and the disarmament of the FMLN in order for it to become a political party rather than an armed group.²⁴ The Salvadoran peace accords are considered to be among the most comprehensive and effective in the world, as they have largely been implemented and there has been a drastic reduction in human rights abuses .

As one scholar of Salvadoran history writes, “while the nation had passed through repeated cycles of liberalization and repression, Salvadorans had never had a truly democratic form of government prior to the 1992 peace accords.”²⁵ Today, that same party which originally grew out of the armed revolutionary struggle won the presidency in the historic elections of 2009. The election of Mauricio Funes, a former journalist, marked the first peaceful democratic transition between the two dominant political parties that came out of the war, ARENA who had held the presidential office since 1989, and the FMLN.

Also, after the war ended, the leftist groups that made up the FMLN once again began breaking apart. For the leaders who signed the peace agreements, ARENA’s presidential victory in 1994 came as a shocking blow, as did the party’s re-election in 1999 and 2004. Over the last twenty years, the political left has struggled to maintain unity, and the FMLN has increasingly distanced itself from its guerrilla past, in order to become more appealing to voters. Because of this softening of hard-line ideology, many of the FMLN’s former leaders have left the party. Some have departed from El Salvador all together (such as the ERP’s front man Joaquín

²⁴ Margarita S. Studemeister, ed, “El Salvador: Implementation of the Peace Accords,” *Peaceworks* No. 38. (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

²⁵ Ladutke, 7.

Villalobos). Others, such as Ana Guadalupe Martínez (one of my interviewees), have found a home in smaller political parties such as the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (Christian Democratic Party or PDC). Still others have removed themselves entirely from politics, such as Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, formerly the voice of *Radio Venceremos* who today runs a small, private history museum in San Salvador. Most of my interviewees agree that the FMLN political party of today is more concerned with politics than with pursuing the goals that inspired the revolution.

On the other hand, ARENA managed to consolidate the right behind a conservative, neo-liberal agenda. During ARENA's twenty years in power, El Salvador signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and generally promoted the interests of entrepreneurs and corporations. Today, El Salvador is home to Central America's largest malls and its best highways, the two legacies that the conservative party points to during election seasons. However, there has been little growth in the provision of basic services such as health, education or employment, and the gap between rich and poor has grown dramatically.²⁶

²⁶ Spanish, Douglas Olmedo, *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano El Salvador* (United Nations Development Program, 2010), <http://clie.org.sv/?p=12569> (November 7, 2010).

Theory

In my scholarly investigation about historical memory, three main theoretical ideas stood out and ultimately impacted the direction of my research. The first is the basic theory that history is not static, but rather interpretations of past events are constantly in flux based on the intersection and negotiation of collective memories held and promoted by the various groups that make up a society. Secondly, my project is influenced by the idea that collective memories are communicated in narrative accounts that are actively and intentionally transmitted by the group that is invested in that narrative's preservation. Lastly, I thought extensively about the idea that nations that have undergone collective trauma must reach a consensus about the meaning and interpretations of past events, and that this consensus is either artificially imposed or genuinely agreed upon over the course of time.

The critical study of history and memory in the discipline of sociology is a relatively recent development. Maurice Halbwachs is widely accepted as the first sociologist to examine and address history and memory in his groundbreaking 1950 work *On Collective Memory*.²⁷ In it, he posits the pivotal idea that history is shaped by the collective memories of groups and institutions who each interpret and transmit their versions of events to the next generation. He states that, "there are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society... individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past."²⁸ This same idea is reiterated by Peter Burke, who states that "given the multiplicity of social identities and the co-existence of rival memories and alternative memories, it is surely more fruitful to think in pluralistic terms about the uses of memories to different social groups, who may well have different views about what is significant or worthy of

²⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁸ Halbwachs, 22.

memory.”²⁹ This idea fundamentally contributed to the way I designed my project, and helped me identify which Salvadoran groups and institutions are in a position to successfully promote the narratives of their collective memories in the post-war era. I decided to mainly explore the narratives of El Salvador’s two main political parties, ARENA and the FMLN (and to an extent, the military) because they are the most prominent and powerful institutions who can influence the narrative that is eventually communicated as history.

Later theorists corroborated the idea of history as malleable, and elaborated upon the ways that collective memories are transmitted. In particular, Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge’s article “Historical Memory”³⁰ discusses specific means through which groups transmit their particular understandings of history. Giesen and Junge argue that historical memory “refers to some past episode that can be recounted in a narrative format... it is only within such a narrative frame that individual and collective identities can take form and be communicated.”³¹ They also discuss two principal modes of transmitting these narratives: through intentional attempts that serve to proactively “counteract oblivion,”³² and through non-intentional moments produced by objects, dates and places that passively invoke the past by “intrud[ing] on our minds.”³³ Intentional attempts are conducted by “social carriers of memory [who] store, imagine, and reproduce history in the name of their respective community,”³⁴ while passive transmission occurs when citizens come into contact with objects or places that invoke recollections or mythologies about the past.

²⁹ Peter Burke, “History as a Social Memory” in Jeffrey K. Olick, ed., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 188-192.

³⁰ Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge, “Historical Memory,” in Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin, ed., *Handbook of Historical Sociology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 2003), 326-334.

³¹ Giesen and Junge, 326.

³² Giesen and Junge, 326.

³³ Giesen and Junge, 326.

³⁴ Giesen and Junge, 331.

The collective memories of the four figures discussed in this paper are indeed reproduced through both of these forms of transmission. The political right and left actively seek to transmit their respective narratives through writing books, giving political speeches, and building monuments and museums. Because of their crucial role in constructing and transmitting narratives of history, I sought out “social carriers of memory” such as politicians, professors and museum curators to interview for my project. They are the ones who participate in this intentional communication process, so I felt that getting their perspectives would give particular insight into the intentionality of history’s construction and transmission. It is also these carriers of memory who invest in the creation of spaces and objects that function as catalysts to passively invoke memories and particular narratives. Objects such as monuments and street signs must be encountered by citizens and visitors in their daily lives, and serve as reminders that are passively absorbed by the observer.

The last main theoretical idea that framed my thinking in the development of this project was explored by Paloma Aguilar in her analysis of collective memory in the Spanish Civil War entitled *Memory and Amnesia*.³⁵ She discusses the silencing of multiple narratives of history under Franco, and proceeds to describe the way a national consensus of history can be built in the wake of a collective trauma. In my work, I consider the negotiated end of the Salvadoran Civil War to be the antithesis of the imposed dictatorship that resulted in Spain. For that reason, the analysis of Aguilar’s work is necessarily comparative in the sense that there are more differences than similarities in the two cases.

³⁵ Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002).

After the Spanish Civil War, Franco's victorious Nationalists agreed that it was best to "silence the bitter voices of the past"³⁶ and disallowed any recognition of the Republican cause or struggle. Aguilar writes that

After the Civil War, Spain was forced to face a panorama of divided memories. A large proportion of the memories of the losing side... resided in exile, and those that remained were silenced through repression and censorship... these memories only existed at a family level, and even then this was not always the case due to the fear of repression.³⁷

Because of this phobia of narrative difference, the Franco regime implemented a rigid system of socialization that silenced dissonant voices and imposed the narrative of events necessary to maintain power:

Throughout the almost forty-year span of the régime, numerous rites were created that established a sense of continuity with a glorious ancestral past and with the spirit of victory relating to the Civil War. However, this process of mythologisation witnessed a number of serious problems given that it evoked a rupture of national unity. It is not possible to construct the founding myth of a nation on a division of this kind, at least not for long.³⁸

Though there was a perceived consensus in the sense that there were no opposing voices in the arena, it was an imposed and therefore illegitimate consensus that covered up rather than addressing the ruptured, fragmented understandings of events. Aguilar describes the superficiality of national consensus under Franco saying

The régime was never capable of bringing about real reconciliation because this would have undermined the foundations of its legitimacy by allowing the population to reach the conclusion that the war had been an unnecessary farce.

True reconciliation cannot be reached without a degree of political openness that did not come about in Spain until after Franco's death, but that began immediately after the peace negotiations

³⁶ Aguilar, xx.

³⁷ Aguilar, 32.

³⁸ Aguilar, 137.

in El Salvador. Aguilar's book demonstrates that when national wounds are artificially covered, they must be reconciled with eventually because an imposed consensus is a false consensus.

In visiting El Salvador after reading Aguilar's book, I began to see manifestations of the difference between a case of imposed consensus (i.e. Spain as described in *Memory and Amnesia*), and a country where no adequate consensus has been reached, but a variety of powerful institutions have the ability to promote and preserve their narratives. Because of Aguilar's analysis, I believe that the fragmentation of understanding in the Salvadoran case, exemplified by the figures discussed in Chapter 2, is in fact a healthy and necessary step towards a true reconciliation narrative, such as the one that emerged in Spain a half-century after their conflict. In Spain's case, the narrative of war as collective madness that implicates all and blames no-one has risen in prominence.³⁹ Though a generally acceptable, unifying narrative is not yet evident in the Salvadoran case, I do believe that the two historical figures discussed in Chapter 3 show the beginnings of a shared understanding that cannot be come to without acknowledging the fragmented nature of a civil conflict.

³⁹ Aguilar, 209.

Methods

During the summer of 2010, I traveled to El Salvador for five weeks to conduct interviews and make observations about the way that the four historical figures featured in my project are currently being articulated and represented in sites of memory, particularly museums and monuments. I chose to interview people that I consider to be carriers of memory, and who are powerful enough to make an impact on the eventual historical narrative of the war. Thanks to my father's work, reputation, and connections as a former correspondent for the *Washington Post*, I had access to some of El Salvador's leading thinkers and political actors, all of whom had an active roll in the conflict itself. As a bilingual Salvadoran-American, I found myself in a special position to conduct this research as both an insider and an outsider.

Ultimately, I was able to conduct fourteen interviews with: five current members of the FMLN who are part of Mauricio Funes' administration, three university professors, two museum curators (one from the Museo de la Revolución in Morazán and the other from the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen in San Salvador), one ARENA politician, one PDC politician, one military official, and one descendant of the coffee-growing oligarchy, who helped to found ARENA in the early 1980s.⁴⁰

I was able to network much more effectively within the Salvadoran left than with the right, so unfortunately the voices I catalogued in my interviews are overwhelmingly sympathetic to the FMLN and to more leftist ideologies. In order to supplement the narrative of the right, I have included quotes taken from two texts written by former military officers: a military school textbook entitled *In Defense of the Fatherland: A History of the Armed Conflict in El Salvador*

⁴⁰ For further information about individual interviewees, please consult Appendix (b).

1980-1992, by former general Humberto Corado Figueroa, and a combined testimony and political analysis entitled *Profiles of the War* by former general Juan Orlando Zepeda. Though right-wing military history and political history are not one and the same I did not find adequate sources written by prominent right-wing thinkers outside of the military establishment.

My interviews were semi-structured and I used the same prepared list of questions with politicians, military officers, and academics. These including, “how would you explain the Salvadoran Civil War to someone with no knowledge of our country’s history?” and “I am focusing my project on [each of the four historical figures]. What was his roll in the conflict, and what does he mean today?” However, I tailored some interviews, such as those with the museum curators and the politicians who were involved in constructing particular monuments, to their efforts to preserve or commemorate history. They were all conducted in Spanish, and later translated. Some were transcribed and translated by a paid Salvadoran transcriber, and others I processed myself.

Also, some politicians had very strict time constraints and only allowed me to interview them for a few minutes. In those circumstances, I limited my interview questions to those especially pertinent to his or her position in politics (i.e., I asked Commander Schafik Handal’s son, who today is a federal legislator, more specific questions about his father than about the other three figures).

Though my methods fall short of encapsulating a full picture of El Salvador’s current political landscape, my small sample of interviewees includes some very powerful actors who belong to even more powerful institutions. Thus their thoughts, opinions, and narrative interpretations of events are more likely to reflect the direction that official history is taking at the present time, nineteen years after the end of the civil conflict.

Chapter 2

Divisive Narratives: Colonel Monterrosa and Major d'Aubuisson

In this chapter, I will discuss the competing narratives that simultaneously exist about Colonel Domingo Monterrosa and Major Roberto d'Aubuisson. Polarized understandings of these two men are consistently divided between the political left and the political right, e.g. those who fought for the FMLN during the war, and those who either were part of the military, or sympathized with those who fought against the guerrillas. These divisions demonstrate the stark polarization that continues to linger in post-war El Salvador. However, it also demonstrates the relative openness that has resulted from the Peace Accord. Because of the negotiated peace, institutions and political parties can hold up the figures they choose and though there may be backlash and dissent from other sectors of society, there is not an officially sanctioned silencing, as has occurred in the wake of other civil conflicts in the twentieth century.

Though there is inevitably some overlap in the descriptions of both d'Aubuisson and Monterrosa on the left and right, each of them is remembered in fundamentally different ways by each side. Monterrosa is held up by conservatives and the military in particular as their greatest soldier, and as a martyr. On the other hand, the left remembers him for leading his troops in the undertaking of several infamous massacres, among them the internationally recognized slaughter that occurred in El Mozote. The FMLN also remembers and celebrates the intelligence operation that took his life. Roberto d'Aubuisson similarly elicits responses polarized along political divisions. Conservatives, both military and non-military, hail him for his key role in containing communist aggression and bringing democracy to El Salvador. The left remembers him primarily for his role as the head of paramilitary death squads, and particularly as the intellectual architect of Archbishop Oscar Romero's assassination in 1980.

The narratives that exist about these two men are often dissonant and in some cases, directly contradictory. This is in part because each of them is directly linked, through testimonial evidence, to some of the worst and most publicly recognized atrocities of the conflict, and yet their respective institutions do not condemn them, but rather lift them up as leaders who did what was necessary in difficult circumstances. Their critics cannot look past the crimes that they are accused of, and because both of these men died decades ago, neither was brought to justice. The societal wounds that they left behind remain unhealed and foster disharmony rather than reconciliation.

Though this project was not designed with the intention of arguing that right-wing figures are polarizing and left-wing figures are unifying, the United Nations Truth Commission Report, which compiled more than 22,000 victim statements,⁴¹ claims that 60% of the reported human rights violations were perpetrated by the armed forces; 25% were committed by police and the National Guard; 20% were committed by military escorts and in self-defense; 10 % were carried out by death squads; and only 5% were reported to have been committed by the FMLN.⁴² Though ARENA and the military do not accept these figures, it is clear that the right wing carried out a disproportionate percentage of the violence as compared to the guerrillas, and thus there are few documented, high-profile cases of FMLN abuses that could be comparable either to the El Mozote massacre, or to Romero's assassination.

Colonel Domingo Monterrosa

Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, born in 1940, began his rise to prominence during his time at the Gerardo Barrios Military Academy as a teenager. He stood out as one of the strongest and most charismatic of the *tanda*, or graduating class, of 1963. After graduation, he taught at the

⁴¹ Spanish, Óscar Martínez Peñate, ed., *El Salvador: Los acuerdos de paz y el informe de la comisión de la verdad* (San Salvador: Editorial Nuevo Enfoque, 2007), 159.

⁴² Martínez Peñate, 159.

academy before going on to be trained at the U.S. military base in Panama, and was chosen to learn special counter-insurgency strategies in Taiwan before returning to El Salvador in the early 1970s. After Colonel Arturo Molina took power in the controversial 1972 elections, Monterrosa became one of his closest friends and advisors, and thus one of the most powerful individuals in the country.⁴³

During the conflict, Colonel Monterrosa was chosen to command the Atlacatl Battalion, the most elite of the rapid reaction units trained by the U.S. military. Journalist Mark Danner describes his leadership saying, “Monterrosa seemed a soldier of the classic type: aggressive, charismatic, a man who liked nothing better than to get out in the field and fight alongside his troops. The Salvadoran grunts... loved Monterrosa for his willingness to get down in the dirt with them and fight.”⁴⁴ The colonel’s leadership earned him the respect and loyalty of many both inside and outside the military.

However, Monterrosa’s legacy is tainted because of the Atlacatl Battalion’s adherence to the belief that all civilians residing in guerrilla-controlled territories were indistinguishable from, and thus equally dangerous as guerrillas themselves.⁴⁵ This idea resulted in several of the conflict’s most infamous massacres, in particular the annihilation of the entire town (save one survivor) of El Mozote in December, 1981. The massacre claimed the lives of at least 800 civilians, among them more than 400 children.⁴⁶ This massacre, and others in the regions of Morazán and Chalatenango were actively denied for years both by the Salvadoran government and the U.S. Congress, who continued funding the Salvadoran armed forces despite reports of extreme human rights abuses such as these.

⁴³ Mark Danner, “The Massacre at El Mozote,” *The New Yorker* 6 Dec. 1993, 56.

⁴⁴ Danner, 61.

⁴⁵ Danner, 59.

⁴⁶ For a full description of the atrocities committed in this massacre, please reference Danner’s article in full.

In 1984, the ERP faction of the FMLN, which controlled the department of Morazán (under the direction of commander Joaquín Villalobos) developed a plan to kill Monterrosa which hinged on his obsession with the rebel radio station, *Radio Venceremos* (roughly translated as Radio We Shall Be Victorious), which broadcast from combat zones in the mountainous forests near the Honduran border. Monterrosa considered the destruction of the radio station as vital to demoralizing and weakening the guerrilla movement. He was also well known for keeping trophies from the sites of important military victories, and based on this knowledge, the FMLN designed a Trojan horse-style operation that they hoped would lure the officer into enemy territory.

The guerrillas provoked a skirmish, allowed a fake transmitter filled with explosives to be captured by the army, and cut transmission in order to convince the military that they had truly captured *Radio Venceremos*. In four long years of transmission, the radio had never before gone dead. Military intelligence took this to mean that the transmitter had truly been abandoned. Once Colonel Monterrosa heard the news, he decided that he and his five closest military advisers would personally retrieve the transmitter in a helicopter. With the radio equipment successfully captured and placed in the chopper, the colonel and his advisors took off with their trophy in tow. From the ground, FMLN guerrillas detonated the explosives hidden inside the transmitter, and watched the helicopter, filled with elite military personnel, explode in the sky above the mountains.⁴⁷

This event rocked the military establishment and energized guerilla forces across the country. With the passing of time, Monterrosa has remained a central figure within military history. The military museum honors him with his own exhibit, decorated with a floor-to-ceiling

⁴⁷ As told in the FMLN oral history compilation: José Ignacio López Vigil, *Rebel Radio: The Story of El Salvador's Radio Venceremos*, trans. Mark Fried (Willimantic, CT: Curbston Press, 1994).

portrait of the colonel, his uniform, and plaques explaining his excellence as an officer. Current and former military personnel, as well as many right-wing sympathizers, remember him as the best of the best, an example of excellence and a symbol of sacrifice. His death is also considered to be an example of the barbarous tactics employed by the guerrillas, who refused to play by the rules of war.

For the FMLN, this story remains as one of the great moments in the mythology of the movement because it epitomizes their overarching David and Goliath narrative. It is a story often retold in the region of Morazán, where the events took place. The *Museo de la Revolución* (Museum of the Revolution) in Morazán even houses the remnants of the Colonel's helicopter in a permanent outdoor exhibit. Colonel Monterrosa is remembered in equal measure as a martyr and as a villain by sectors of society unwilling to compromise their own understanding of events, and thus parallel narratives are maintained by parallel institutions, particularly museums.

Though he is a divisive figure overall, some aspects of the narrative surrounding Colonel Monterrosa are consistent and unified, particularly his reputation as a good soldier and a charismatic leader. Even his enemies during the war discuss these attributes. For instance, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, the head of *Radio Venceremos* who played an instrumental role in developing the plan that killed Monterrosa said of him that, "he was very upstanding and had a lot of military initiative."⁴⁸ Dagoberto Gutierrez, another former guerrilla also commented that

In El Salvador's cruel and total war, the government's army had in Monterrosa its boldest, most audacious and hardworking leader. Us *guerrilleros*, we recognized hardworking leaders, we knew that they were the ones that woke up at 5 am and started moving their troops towards us. We knew that. Monterrosa was one of those.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Interview, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

⁴⁹ Interview, Dagoberto Gutierrez, July 29, 2010.

This sentiment was echoed in more than half of the twelve interviews that discussed Monterrosa from all across the military and political spectrum. However, the right-wing and military interviewees celebrate him as a hero, while the left, particularly those interviewees who were formerly guerrillas, qualified their acknowledgements of his military prowess with mentions of the human rights violations he committed.

For the conservative sector of Salvadoran society, particularly the military, Colonel Monterrosa is often acclaimed as one of the best soldiers in history, and his death is considered to be particularly tragic. For instance, Alfredo Mena Lagos, a conservative talk-show host and founding member of the ARENA political party, said of him that “he was an honest official. He was effective, and he could have done a lot of good things for his country. That’s why they killed him.”⁵⁰ This sentiment was elaborated upon by General Mauricio Vargas, who served under him at the beginning of the conflict:

I had the opportunity to meet him and work with him, so I can say that he was a man that established special civilian and military relationships. He also harvested and supported the search for a resolution of the conflict. His death was a very grave loss for the institution, he was a spearhead, a symbol. With his leadership a change occurred in the armed forces. His death was very painful and it wasn’t only felt by the armed forces but also by the other sectors that he had worked with.⁵¹

In official statements of military history, the same narrative is also reproduced. This is most clearly seen in the following two examples, the first from the military school textbook *In Defense of the Fatherland* which states that:

The [Atlatcatl] battalion numbered more than a thousand soldiers under the command of Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, who was later proclaimed by the voice of the people as a martyr and hero of the Fatherland.⁵²

⁵⁰ Interview, Alfredo Mena Lagos, August 12, 2010.

⁵¹ Interview, Mauricio Vargas, July 19, 2010.

⁵² Spanish, General Humberto Corado Figueroa, *En defensa de la patria: Historia del conflicto armado en El Salvador, 1989-1992* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Tecnoimpresas, 2008), 298.

This text not only asserts Monterrosa's martyrdom but also claims that his reputation as a hero is derived from popular mythology, perpetuated by the Salvadoran people rather than the military establishment.

The second and most overt example of how the military officially maintains the narrative of Colonel Monterrosa as a martyr is the permanent exhibit dedicated to him in the *Museo Militar Ex-Cuartel El Zapote* (the museum of military history, housed in a former barrack in the outlying San Salvador neighborhood of San Jacinto). One entire room is dedicated to his memory and is titled:



Figure 2.1⁵³

At the entrance of the exhibit stands a plaque that reads:

This exhibit is presented in memory of the one called, at the moment of his death, the Commander of the 3rd Infantry Brigade, born leader and brilliant fighter: Lt. Col DEM Domingo Monterrosa Barrios, a war hero who offered up his life in the fulfillment of his duty on the 23rd of October, 1984. This man, a symbol of the military campaign undertaken between 1980 and 1992, brought glory to the pages of military history, and today we honor his memory.

The exhibit features a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the officer, and many of his personal effects including his uniform, his medals, and his journals (pictured in Figure 2.2). Nowhere in the exhibit are there descriptions either of the particular operations he was associated with, or the manner in which he was killed.

⁵³ Author's photo. January, 2010.



Figure 2.2⁵⁴

These omissions stand in stark contrast to the two-fold manner in which the left speaks about Colonel Monterrosa. Rather than focus on his accomplishments, interviewees highlighted the human rights violations that he and the Atlacatl battalion committed, particularly in the department of Morazán, near the border with Honduras, as well as describing the operation in which he was killed. For instance, Nidia Díaz, a former PRTC guerrilla and current representative to the Central American Congress described him saying,

He was ruthless; he would drug his battalion so that they would commit the most atrocious of crimes. Everyone feared the Atlacatl battalion for their unabashed brutality.... He had accumulated so much hatred among the revolutionary forces because he was responsible for the deaths of *campesinos*, of civilians, mostly.⁵⁵

This was similarly described by Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, who founded Radio Venceremos and was an active ERP guerrilla in Morazán. Unlike Díaz, he specifically referenced the massacre at El Mozote:

[Monterrosa] was named head of the Atlacatl Battalion, as we know, this battalion was involved in many massacres across the whole country but the worst and most emblematic one was the massacre of El Mozote which left a thousand peasants dead among them 400 young children.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Author's photo. January 2010.

⁵⁵ Interview, Nidia Díaz. August 9, 2010.

⁵⁶ Interview, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

The colonel was similarly discussed by Ronaldo Cáceres, a former ERP guerrilla in Morazán who later founded the *Museo de la Revolución* (Museum of the Revolution) near the remains of El Mozote in the town of Perquín:

This guy was a very effective military man, he ascended to becoming officer and wanted to be minister of defense. The first elite battalion is sworn in on August 15th 1981, the Atlacatl Battalion. In December, between the 9 and 11, under his command, they committed the biggest massacre in our country, El Mozote.⁵⁷

These quotes illustrate the tendency for the left to describe Colonel Monterrosa in terms of the atrocities that his battalion committed and highlight the brutality of these acts.

Logically, those who belonged to the FMLN during the war also highlighted the operation in which Monterrosa was killed. It is held up as a moment that particularly represents the innovation of the guerrillas in the face of an enemy armed and trained by the United States. For instance, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, who played a leadership role in the operation because he was the head of the clandestine radio station, described the event saying,

The guerrilla sets up a trap as old as the Trojan horse and that is when he dies, in a helicopter that was taken down, along with other military chiefs, very close to where the massacre of El Mozote took place. His death was a very harsh blow to the military, and being that, it was also a point in favor of peace.⁵⁸

Others included even more detail in their account of Monterrosa's death. For instance, Nidia Díaz, a former PRTC guerrilla, gave a more extensive version of events:

So in 1984, when he says that he has destroyed the radio station, he took the transmitter in his helicopter, but it was really a bomb. It was an intelligence mission for the guerrillas that worked in the Western part of El Salvador... He took the radio as a trophy, but it exploded in his helicopter, and that's how he died, that's how the operation was. It's not that I'm happy about it, but I want to tell you that the day he died, the Salvadoran people felt a great sense of relief, the entire guerrilla force and much of the civilian population, because he really was very blood-thirsty... His death was felt by the powerful sectors of society because he was their best military strategist... but I don't recognize anything positive about him. Other people might, but in my case, I saw the people suffer because of

⁵⁷ Interview, Rolando Cáceres. July 30, 2010.

⁵⁸ Interview, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

the horrific operations he conducted against the civilian population, so I can't recognize any sort of merit.⁵⁹

Beyond these testimonies about the importance of Monterrosa's death, the gesture that symbolizes the left's celebration of this strategic victory is the preservation of the helicopter's remains at the *Museo de la Revolución* in Perquín, Morazán (pictured in Figure 2.3). The director, Rolando Cáceres, describes the operation that killed the colonel, and why the museum continues to house the destroyed chopper:

Monterrosa puts the transmitter on his lap and the helicopter climbs and as it nears a hill, [it] detonates and the helicopter is turned into a fireball that kills everyone inside on October 23rd 1984 at 16:00 hours in Joateca. The Trojan horse worked they tell us, we gave them the trophy and with the trophy came defeat. All the heads of Operation Torola 4 are killed in a single strategic move. This leaves us with a lesson as all war stories do, war is not won by the strongest but by the smartest. We kept the helicopter's remains- what we did so that they would not be taken away was drop walls on them and hide them, because they took all the bodily remains, but we came back after the war and now we have the [helicopter's] remains here.⁶⁰



Figure 2.3⁶¹

Overall, the left has a somewhat nuanced view of Monterrosa, as someone who possessed and was respected for his unrivalled military and strategic skills. This view is simultaneously reconciled with the idea that he was a brutal killer, who was cold-hearted enough to kill civilians,

⁵⁹ Interview, Nidia Díaz. August 9, 2010.

⁶⁰ Interview, Rolando Cáceres. July 30, 2010.

⁶¹ Author's photo. July, 2010.

especially children. The following quote, articulated by Professor of Philosophy Ricardo Ribera, synthesizes the three primary narrative elements present in left-wing accounts of who Monterrosa was:

From a military perspective, he was a very efficient soldier. Of course he dies the victim of a booby trap... which contradicts his myth a bit, that he falls for the false radio transmitter. Villalobos [the FMLN commander in Morazán] was more astute than he was. That's the trouble with his mythology. From the public's point of view, taking into account human rights abuses, he is the one responsible for the Mozote massacre, among many others. So one has to ask, why have they picked him, why not look for someone else, since he has this shadow over him? Brilliant, but also one of the most heinous violators of human rights.⁶²

In this excerpt from his interview, Ribera acknowledges Monterrosa's military skill, as well as mentioning both the manner in which he died and the atrocities he is associated with.

The quotes above illustrate the way in which the right and the left have constructed parallel and competing narratives about Colonel Domingo Monterrosa. On the one hand, he is among the most esteemed and revered figures in Salvadoran military history. Simultaneously, the left holds firmly to the narrative of Monterrosa as one of El Salvador's most brutal abusers of human rights, who achieved greatness through unforgivable means, and whose death brought relief to terrorized populations across the northern and western provinces.

Major Roberto d'Aubuisson

Roberto d'Aubuisson Arrieta was born on August 23, 1943 to a middle-class family of French descent on the outskirts of San Salvador. He was educated in a military academy and as a young man served in the National Guard, where he began training in national security and intelligence. D'Aubuisson rose to greater prominence when Jorge Alberto Medrano, the National Guard's commander, took him under his wing as his protégé in the 1960s. During the

⁶² Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010.

1970s, d'Aubuisson was chosen to study intelligence and security in Virginia, New York, Taiwan, Uruguay, and later on at the U.S. military base in Panama.⁶³

By the end of the 1970s, d'Aubuisson had reached the rank of Major. In 1979, a pro-reform military junta conducted a coup against President Carlos Humberto Romero, and in the process purged hard-line right-wing officers, including d'Aubuisson. Despite being expelled from the military, he went on to found the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*, or ARENA (National Republican Alliance) political party in 1981. It in turn became the political mouthpiece for the most conservative Salvadorans who fought against all kinds of political change, in particular agrarian reform.

These same powerful interests also allegedly bankrolled paramilitary groups, known as death squads, to silence those who supported change.⁶⁴ In particular, d'Aubuisson and the death squads have been linked through informal testimony to the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero (discussed more at length in Chapter 3). This evidence came to light in 1987, when the get-away driver who assisted in killing the Archbishop came forward with his testimony.⁶⁵

Roberto d'Aubuisson was known simply as "The Major," and began appearing on national television to denounce "subversives," from school teachers to labor leaders to politicians. Within days of his pronouncements, the corpses of these same individuals would most often be found disfigured and with signs of torture. These killings became known as the signature *modus operandi* of the death squads, and d'Aubuisson's connection to them was publicly known, but largely unspoken, for fear of retribution. Despite these associations,

⁶³ Richard Severo, "Roberto d'Aubuisson, 48, Far-Rightist in Salvador," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1992 (LexisNexis).

⁶⁴ Severo, "Roberto d'Aubuisson."

⁶⁵ William Branigin, "Duarte Says Romero Case Solved; Witness Implicates Rightist D'Aubuisson in Archbishop's Death," *The Washington Post*, November 23, 1987 (LexisNexis).

d'Aubuisson enjoyed widespread popular support among people of all social and economic background because of his charisma and political skill.⁶⁶

During the 1980s, d'Aubuisson entered the political arena in earnest, serving as the president of El Salvador's national Constituent Assembly in 1982 and 1983. In 1984, he ran for president as ARENA's candidate, but narrowly lost to the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (Christian Democratic Party, or PDC) candidate José Napoleón Duarte.^{67 68} In the elections of 1989, he abdicated his place as ARENA's candidate, and the party ran Alfredo Cristiani instead, who was victorious over his PDC opponent. Though throughout the conflict, d'Aubuisson had been staunchly against negotiating with the guerrillas, he gradually changed his mind as the war went on, and supported President Cristiani's participation in the peace talks between 1990 and the signing of the accords in 1992.⁶⁹ He died on February 20, 1992 after a long battle with throat cancer, scarcely a month after the Peace Accord was signed in Chapultepec, Mexico.

The opinions expressed by interviewees show that d'Aubuisson was a multi-faceted and controversial figure who enjoyed both widespread popular support and complicity, while simultaneously engendering a deep-seated hatred within the FMLN and their supporters. Because of this, distinct narratives have emerged from the right and the left to explain his significance as a historical figure. The right focuses on his accomplishments and leadership, while the left highlights the atrocities that he is associated with, much in the same way as they do in Colonel Monterrosa's case.

⁶⁶ Douglas Farah, "D'Aubuisson: Death Comes to the Executioner," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 1992 (LexisNexis).

⁶⁷ Severo, "Roberto d'Aubuisson."

⁶⁸ However, these elections are not considered to be widely representative because there was a large movement to boycott the ballot among FMLN supporters.

⁶⁹ Severo, "Roberto d'Aubuisson."

For ARENA and those less formally affiliated with the right-wing, d'Aubuisson is primarily remembered for founding the party and for responding to the heightened communist threat that loomed after the Sandinista victory in neighboring Nicaragua. His friend and fellow founder of ARENA, Alfredo Mena Lagos described him saying, "He had his good side and his bad side. He was a very charismatic leader. However he was not very principled. On the other hand, he was someone who helped contain communist aggression."⁷⁰ Similarly, Milagro Navas, an ARENA mayor from the San Salvador suburb of Antiguo Cuscatlán claimed that,

I joined [ARENA] because Roberto d'Aubuisson had clear principles and ideas about what he wanted for our country. These came about because of the dangers that there were during that time that socialism and communism could creep into our country... He was the maximum leader of our party. Those of us who love ARENA, the ones who love our country, remember him with that sort of fondness.⁷¹

This was also stated in the memoir of General Orlando Zepeda who wrote that,

D'Aubuisson [sic]...became the hero of the right, he was the standard-bearer in both the civilian and military fight against the communist threat, the political-social phenomenon named D'Aubuisson [sic] wrote himself into our nation's history; later, with a group of other concerned civilians, he founds the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* [ARENA], a political movement that managed to strengthen and organize the democratic right wing, which had previously been unstable and in the midst of an institutional crisis.⁷²

Other right-wing quotes mention d'Aubuisson's alleged involvement with death squads and the accusations of his responsibility for Archbishop Romero's assassination. For instance, Mayor Milagro Navas went on to say that, "I think the Major needs to be remembered. What happened is that they accused him of all kinds of things, including that he ordered the killing of Monseñor Romero, which we all know, well at least I believe, isn't true."⁷³ Similarly, when General

⁷⁰ Interview, Alfredo Mena Lagos, August 12, 2010.

⁷¹ Interview, Milagro Navas. July 26, 2010

⁷² Spanish, General Juan Orlando Zepeda Herrera, *Perfiles de la guerra en El Salvador*. (San Salvador, El Salvador: NewGraphics, 2008), 81.

⁷³ Interview, Milagro Navas. July 26. 2010.

Mauricio Vargas discussed Major d'Aubuisson, he did describe him as the founder of ARENA, and also hesitantly mentioned the accusations against him saying

[d'Aubuisson] forms the political party that rules the country over four terms, twenty years. He becomes a symbol for the right, specifically the more conservative right... He is accused of death squads and of many things, but what I know about it is hearsay and what I've read, but I don't know for sure... I don't know whether any of it is true or not.⁷⁴

It is only in these limited ways that the right wing tenuously alludes to the darker side of d'Aubuisson's legacy. Unsurprisingly, these are the same elements that are emphasized by his enemies, who hope to discredit the mythology of d'Aubuisson as a national hero.

Former and current members of the left have a generally unified understanding of who d'Aubuisson was. Though he is often recognized as an important and intelligent leader, the alleged atrocities he is associated with overshadow his merits. For instance Professor Ricardo Ribera of the Jesuit Central American University said of him that,

One always speaks well of the deceased, but even dead everyone speaks badly of d'Aubuisson. Those were terrible times... and we can't dump all the atrocities on one person. He was not just a genocidal torturer, but also an intelligent guy, a political animal... Of course he was probably the intellectual author of Romero's assassination, but he was also an important leader in the peace process.⁷⁵

Similarly, Nidia Díaz, former PRTC guerrilla and current member of the Central American Congress, described him saying that,

For us, d'Aubuisson was the founder first of the death squads and later of ARENA. He was such an ideologue, terrible, he was against the people... he was intolerant. He refused to have any sort of dialogue at the beginning, though by the end of the war he supported negotiation... Within his party, he was the prevailing voice. Though he changed his mind, he originally did not favor a political solution, he saw the proponents of dialogue as enemies... He was a leader, even though he didn't have much money, he became the number one defender of the oligarchy's interests. He worked for the oligarchy so they would finance the death squads... He even had fascist tendencies.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Interview, Mauricio Vargas. July 19, 2010.

⁷⁵ Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010.

⁷⁶ Interview, Nidia Díaz. August 8, 2010.

This was expressed in more Marxist terms by Dagoberto Gutierrez, former PCES guerrilla and current professor at the Lutheran University of El Salvador:

He was very smart... you know the leader is the one that expresses the psychology of a part of society.... He became an instrument of the oligarchy and his methods, the death squads and his repressive agents, did nothing more than to stress the political regime of this country. In this country there has never been a consensus.... He formed a party that served as an instrument of the dominant class and unified it under the classes' control.⁷⁷

Gerson Martínez, a former FPL guerrilla and current Minister of the Interior, also stated that,

He did not come up with death squadrons in the country. Way before his time, things like that were already happening here... but I think the fact that dishonored him the most was his participation in the assassination of Monseñor Romero.⁷⁸

Overall, the left remembers Major d'Aubuisson as a successful and charismatic politician, but his ties to the death squads, and particularly the accusation that he ordered Archbishop Romero's assassination provoke such a degree of hatred that his positive legacy is significantly overshadowed.

Both sides still actively promote their narratives, and on some occasions, these collide head-on. One site where this conflict plays out is the traffic circle in Antiguo Cuscatlán built for d'Aubuisson in 2006. The monument on the circle has four sides, each emblazoned with one of the Major's signature slogans: "Fatherland Yes! Communism No!"; "First El Salvador, Second El Salvador, Third El Salvador"; "Present for the Fatherland!"; and "The most powerful weapon that free men possess is the vote." In the middle stands a towering flag pole with the Salvadoran flag waving at the top. Every year on the anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death, protesters gather at this monument to remind the world of d'Aubuisson's involvement, and on this occasion in 2010, the monument was defaced (pictured in Figure 2.5). The graffiti consisted of the spray-

⁷⁷ Interview, Dagoberto Gutierrez. July 19, 2010.

⁷⁸ Interview, Gerson Martínez. July 21, 2010.

painted outline of a body on the ground, and the words *Asesino quien*, roughly translated as “who are you calling an assassin?”⁷⁹ written across the base.

The defacement of d’Aubuisson’s monument nicely juxtaposes manifestations of the two narratives, and illustrates the passion with which each side holds on to their own beliefs. The monument itself serves to promote the narrative of d’Aubuisson as a hero, specifically as El Salvador’s number one patriot, and as the father of democracy. The graffiti in turn is a reminder that others remember him as the great assassin, who ordered the death of countless Salvadorans, many of them who remain anonymous, as the outline on the ground conveys.



Figure 2.5⁸⁰

Colonel Monterrosa and Major d’Aubuisson illustrate cases where clear-cut, oppositional narratives have emerged. For the right-wing, both are hailed as heroes due to the exceptional skills they each possessed, Monterrosa as a military strategist, and d’Aubuisson as a politician. The main trope used by the right to discuss Monterrosa is that he died a martyr, and that he was a

⁷⁹ I interpret this to be a reference to the manner in which d’Aubuisson described the guerrillas during the war, as assassins and killers.

⁸⁰ Photo by Luis Romero, Associated Press. Personal Collection.

model figure to be emulated by future generations of soldiers. On the left, some such as Professor Ricardo Ribera of the Jesuit Central American University (UCA), are disappointed that the military has chosen Monterrosa as their exemplary figure. He expressed this to me saying,

One has to wonder, why did they pick him, why not someone else without that shadow?... It's not so much that there weren't other heroes, it reflects the ideology of the military to have picked him, it's a case of ideological belligerence... it's too bad because future generations of the military will have to carry that legacy placed upon them by the war-time leaders. It's ideological belligerency, it's saying, if they accuse us of violating human rights, let's hold up the greatest of the violators, let's build him a statue, it's challenging the construction of true democracy, it's a battle of symbology... In the long run, it will be a dishonor for the military to hold up those who violate human rights.⁸¹

Though many interviewees from all across the political spectrum recognized Monterrosa's extraordinary abilities as an officer, the left cannot accept him because he and his battalion are credibly linked to numerous atrocities that occurred during the war.

Similarly, D'Aubuisson is recognized by all as a charismatic figure who was able to bring unity to the right. Because he founded ARENA, the party and their followers continue to describe him as the ultimate politician and hold him up as a founding father who was unfairly accused of committing (or ordering) crimes perpetrated by the death squads, in particular Romero's assassination. However, it is unlikely that he will become a generally accepted or unifying figure because of these accusations, grounded in testimonial evidence, that the left continually turn to.

Though it is unlikely that either of these men will be collectively forgotten in the near future, neither is it likely that they will become pan-political national icons as both the military and ARENA hope. The divisions in Salvadoran society are too deep, and the conflict is too recent, for people who are linked with war crimes to be forgiven and held up through a national consensus. Also, because both of these men are deceased, it is easier for mythologies to emerge

⁸¹ Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010.

about them, and yet they cannot be brought to justice. Thus those who remember or experienced the crimes that Monterrosa and d'Aubuisson allegedly committed will never find the kind of closure needed for the national wounds to heal.

Chapter 3

Unified (and Potentially Unifying) Narratives: Archbishop Romero and Commander Handal



Figure 3.1⁸²

While some figures such as Roberto d'Aubuisson and Domingo Monterrosa remain irreconcilably divisive, others have the potential to bring people together. In this chapter, I will discuss the consistent, or *unified*, patterns I saw in narratives concerning Archbishop Oscar Romero and Commander Schafik Jorge Handal, pictured in Figure 3.1. I will also consider evidence that these narratives have the power to be potentially *unifying*. It is important to distinguish between *unified* and *unifying* narratives, because though they are interrelated, they are not interchangeable terms. In the context of this project, I consider that unified narratives are common understandings or interpretations of historical figures that are articulated by people across the political spectrum, who may have even played militarily oppositional roles in the civil conflict. This is in contrast to the competing narratives described in the preceding chapter, that do not allow for a common understanding, and do not foster healing.

⁸² Author's photo. Graffiti in San Salvador, July 2007.

Unified, common understandings have the potential to become unifying narratives or interpretations that can function as part of the post-war reconciliation process. If people can recognize that there is some common ground in place, it could be the starting point for dialogue about the divisive aspects of the war. There is some evidence that this is beginning to happen in the cases of Romero and Handal, through the acceptance of commemorative events and public sites of memory (in these cases, monuments). Though it is difficult to measure the degree to which a society has a unified understanding of its history, I believe that the allowance of public and permanent commemorations of these two figures demonstrates a tacit agreement on the part of their former enemies to recognize their historical importance with minimal challenges.

In this chapter, I will show that Archbishop Romero is consistently remembered as (a) the voice of the voiceless, and (b) as a universal religious and moral guide or compass. Commander Schafik Handal is also remembered in a two-fold way as (a) a key negotiator during the peace process, and (b) as a consistent, honest politician in the post-war period. The universally appealing qualities that are used to describe these figures, as a defender of human rights and a peace negotiator respectively, and as champions of democracy, show possible pieces of a future reconciliation narrative that can only be developed over the passage of generations.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

“Every war in itself is dehumanizing, but Romero’s voice was a call to keep our humanity even in the direst of circumstances. We all revere Monseñor Romero, I am a Christian, but even those who aren’t, revere him.” –Gerson Martínez (Minister of the Interior, FMLN)

The image of Archbishop Oscar Romero is among the most pervasive in El Salvador. His face is graffiti-ed on public buildings, hung in the offices of political officials, painted on the sides of churches and displayed on the walls of people’s homes. Every year on March 24th, millions of Salvadorans around the world hold vigils, services, concerts and other events to

remember his assassination, mid-homily, during the most gruesome period of state-sponsored repression in El Salvador. Today, a copper colored statue of the martyred priest stands at San Salvador's central intersection, a controversial yet accepted reminder of the conflict that ravished the nation for twelve long years.

Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was assassinated in 1980 for his public denouncement of violence, particularly state-sponsored repression. Romero became Archbishop of San Salvador as government repression against protestors and activists swelled during the late 1970s. Though he was originally a moderate priest with conservative tendencies, he became increasingly critical of the repression he witnessed against civilians, activists, and clergy. He began to speak out against the repression after the murder of his friend and fellow cleric, Rutilio Grande in 1977. His homilies, broadcast by radio across the nation, called for all factions to end violence, and preached a divine preference for the poor. He repeatedly called soldiers to disobey orders to kill, and to desert the military.⁸³

Romero's weekly radio addresses made him many enemies, both within the Catholic church and among conservatives, who considered his teachings inflammatory and out of line. Other Salvadoran bishops even went so far as to send a secret letter to the Vatican, reporting his "politicized" activities and claiming he was unfit for his high position in the church.⁸⁴ He was assassinated on March 24th, 1980 during one such homily by an unidentified sniper, who fired a shot from a Volkswagen parked outside the Divina Providencia chapel, as described in the United Nations Truth Commission Report. The Truth Commission also concludes that it was "the ex-major Roberto d'Aubuisson who gave the order to assassinate the Archbishop, and gave precise instructions to members of his security detail, who acted as a 'death squad', to organize

⁸³ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/elsalvador2.htm>

⁸⁴ U.S. Catholic, *Oscar Romero: Bishop of the Poor*. <http://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2009/02/oscar-romero-bishop-poor> (March 20, 2011).

and supervise the assassination's execution.”⁸⁵ No one has yet been brought to justice for his death.

As the oligarchy celebrated his assassination as a victory for the existing social order, his martyrdom convinced many staunch believers in non-violent resistance that a better future could only be achieved through armed revolution, and support for the FMLN swelled after his death. For some, this event marks the beginning of the armed conflict. Throughout the war he was invoked by the guerrilla movement as a martyr who symbolized the death of peaceful social reconciliation, while the military and oligarchy considered his assassination a victory against the forces of change by eliminating “*la voz de los sin voz*” (the voice of the voiceless). He and other priests who spread the doctrine of Liberation Theology were instrumental in awakening class consciousness among poor rural communities.

Today, thirty-one years since his death, the memory of Archbishop Romero is in the process of becoming unifying rather than divisive. He did not officially represent any of the factions that fought the war; rather, he was a cultural figure speaking out for peace and social justice. Because he chose to ally himself with the poor and the voiceless rather than with a particular political organization, and fought with words rather than weapons, he is becoming accepted by most sectors of Salvadoran society as a symbol of peace that must be upheld and remembered. He is a figure of both national and international importance, who highlights the role of progressive sectors within the Salvadoran Catholic Church in mobilizing against injustice, both in his own time and in the present day.

In many of the interviews I conducted during July and August of 2010, I found evidence of a unified narrative emerging around the figure of Romero. Based on my interviews, I have

⁸⁵ Spanish, Óscar Martínez Peñate, ed., *El Salvador: Los acuerdos de paz y el informe de la comisión de la verdad* (San Salvador: Editorial Nuevo Enfoque), 2007.

identified two over-arching tropes that are used repeatedly to discuss Romero's significance in both life and death: Romero as the "voice of the voiceless" and Romero as a non-partisan, spiritual and moral guide. The first of these represents a feeling that the specific values he stood for (preference for the poor) and the actions he took (speaking out to defend the oppressed) were universal human values lost in the madness of war. The second encompasses the sentiment that Romero was an apolitical figure, who should be embraced by Salvadorans of all political stripes. These two elements, one with specific reference to his beliefs and one that describes his universal representation of the Salvadoran nation, work together to construct Romero as a unifying post-war figure. Logically there are those who belong to the extreme right wing, and to particular sectors of the military who speak of Romero as being a political instrument who sympathized with the communist cause. However, the majority of my interviewees, whether current FMLN members, former FMLN members, or moderate conservatives, spoke of Romero using the "voice of the voiceless" and "spiritual guide" tropes described above.

The verbatim phrase *la voz de los sin voz*, or the "voice of the voiceless" appeared time and again in my research. Even when individuals did not use the exact words, all of the ten interviewees who answered questions about Romero⁸⁶ discussed the archbishop's role as a mouthpiece or speaker in some way, including his critics. It is clear that Romero's public homilies, preached over the radio and in churches all over El Salvador during his three years as Archbishop, brought him fame in his own time and established the beginning of his historical legacy.

⁸⁶ Some interviews were tailored to the interviewee's specialty or particular knowledge for the sake of time and efficiency. Politicians Milagro Navas (ARENA) and Jorge Schafik Handal Vega (FMLN) had very limited schedules and could only speak with me for between ten and twenty minutes, so I focused my questions on the figures they were best acquainted with, Roberto d'Aubuisson and Schafik Jorge Handal, respectively. Similarly, I focused my interview with museum curator Roland Cáceres on the Museo de la Revolución, which he founded, and thus questions about Romero were not addressed.

Romero's voice and role as a speaker are discussed by many as being important both in life and in death. His homilies set him apart in life from other religious figures because, in the words of former PCES guerrilla and current professor Dagoberto Gutierrez, "he sided with the weak and confronted the powerful,"⁸⁷ and, as articulated by former ERP guerrilla and current museum curator Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, because "when they heard him, they heard themselves."⁸⁸

Also, some interviewees such as former FPL guerrilla and current Minister of the Interior Gerson Martínez consider that his speaking was one element among other symbolic gestures that he made in order to take a stand against violence:

They're killing his church, so he stops attending officer's events as a sign of mourning and starts being the voice of the people that lacked one. He then starts writing poetry, and I say that in best way possible because most of Romero's homilies are the most beautiful and refined literature, really a thing of beauty. They had increasing bravery and human sensibility. This was a Romero with great fears, but when he spoke for the weak he was transformed, he became much braver.⁸⁹

His alliance with the poor, as demonstrated through his nationally broadcast homilies, was the gesture that ensured Romero's enduring place in the Salvadoran collective memory.

The importance of Romero's voice is also highlighted by the fact that he was assassinated mid-homily, and that the sharp-shooter's bullet literally cut short the words of the Archbishop as he prepared to administer the Eucharist. Interviewees repeatedly asserted that Romero's death was directly tied to his outspokenness, and that when his voice was censored, the conflict escalated. The following quotes explain that Romero was targeted because he spoke in ways that were deemed dangerous by the powerful sectors of Salvadoran society. Professor Dagoberto Gutierrez, a former guerrilla, expressed this saying:

⁸⁷ Interview, Prof. Dagoberto Gutierrez. July 19, 2010.

⁸⁸ Interview, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

⁸⁹ Interview, Gerson Martínez. July 21, 2010.

When Monseñor Romero said in his last homily, ‘In the name of God, I ask of you, I beg you, I order you; stop repressing, stop killing your brothers,’ it was a message to the National Guard, the military and the repressive bodies. That was the moment when the right wing of this country knew they had to kill him.⁹⁰

This was echoed by Eduardo Linares, former FPL guerrilla and current Director of the Salvadoran State Intelligence Organization:

“He became a spokesman for the poor... So the [oligarchy] got confused. They thought that by silencing Monseñor, people would stop rising up. But they were wrong. The opposite happened.”⁹¹

Even some of those who do not speak favorably of Romero discuss him in terms of his role as a spokesman. For instance Mauricio Vargas, a military officer who belongs to an institution that does not generally uphold Romero as a positive symbol, said of him that, “Monseñor was a pastor and we can see from his homilies that he preached what we call the church’s social doctrine a lot. I don’t know if it was the right time or if the tone in which it was delivered were correct, but what is clear is that it was the church’s social doctrine.”⁹² Despite expressing his reservations about praising Romero, Vargas emphasizes his homilies and his preaching as the key aspects of the archbishop’s role in the conflict.

I also interviewed Alfredo Mena Lagos, a conservative talk-show host and descendent of the coffee-growing oligarchy who openly criticized the archbishop, saying that “Romero was a guerrilla mouthpiece, he was their instrument... To be honest, I have very little respect for Monseñor Romero. He distanced himself from his pastoral duties and got mixed up in politics, he allowed himself to be used by the guerrillas.”⁹³ Once again, despite his open distaste for Romero, Mena Lagos refers to him as a “mouthpiece” and as an “instrument.” Though these

⁹⁰ Interview, Prof. Dagoberto Gutierrez. July 19, 2010.

⁹¹ Interview, Eduardo Linares. July 26, 2010.

⁹² Interview, Mauricio Vargas. July 19, 2010

⁹³ Interview, Alfredo Mena Lagos. August 12, 2010

terms are meant in a derogatory fashion, it is clear that it was Romero's role as a speaker that stood out in the minds of both his supporters and his critics.

The second clear trope that emerged from my research about Romero was his current role as a transcendent moral guide for all Salvadorans. Though this is a narrative almost exclusively promoted by the left-wing people I interviewed, and it is not one that is openly supported by conservatives, the mythology of Romero as a universal Salvadoran conscience is bolstered by the public ways his life and death are commemorated. Though the right-wing does not necessarily support these celebrations of Romero, they do not challenge them, and through their silence they are tacit to the promotion of his legacy.

In my interviews, the trope of a non-partisan moral guide was not expressed in one unified way. However, the overall message is clear even when different words are used to express similar ideas. For instance, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, former FMLN guerrilla and current director of the *Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen* (Museum of the Word and the Image), describes that “[Romero] becomes a torch, a spiritual leader, to a big part of the country, most of all the poorest and most ostracized... he increasingly continues to be a bastion of morality and spirituality for our country.”⁹⁴ This sentiment was reiterated by Violeta Menjívar, another former guerrilla and current Vice-Minister of Health, saying, “we understand his actions as Christian, ethical, religious, critical of the lack of democracy and the rampant violation of human rights. He emerges as the... most emblematic figure of El Salvador.”⁹⁵ A similar statement was given by former guerrilla and current Director of the Salvadoran State Intelligence Service, Eduardo Linares, who says that, “Monseñor Romero turns into the spiritual guide for all of us, even for the guerrillas, without having been an FMLN commander, without belonging to any popular

⁹⁴ Interview, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

⁹⁵ Interview, Violeta Menjívar. August 8, 2010.

organizations. It's because he was an ally of the poor.”⁹⁶ These quotes give a dual definition to Romero's transcending leadership, as both a religious man and as a moral figure. These two elements come together to construct him as El Salvador's conscience who wrote and spoke a truth thirty years ago that still resonates today.

Also, there repeatedly appeared clarifications that Romero's convictions came from his religious rather than political beliefs, especially among former and current members of the FMLN. Violeta Menjívar (current Vice-Minister of Health) states the he acted “from his religious perspective, not as a partisan person.”⁹⁷ Professor Ricardo Ribera (exiled during the war for his left-wing sympathies) says that he spoke out “not from a partisan perspective, but rather based on the gospel.”⁹⁸ Similarly, Professor Dagoberto Gutierrez (former member of the FMLN and signer of the Peace Accords) argues that, “he is not a man with a left wing history...He is a product of the people,”⁹⁹ much in the same way as former guerrilla, signer of the Peace Accords, and current moderate politician (member of the Social Democratic Party), Ana Guadalupe Martínez, who says that “it's not that he was a revolutionary; he was just the leader of the church at the time of the peak of the conflict.”¹⁰⁰ All of these demonstrate a clear pattern of emphasizing that Romero was not allied with any particular group, and that his teachings should be interpreted as universal, Christian messages, not as political statements.

I also found this to be true in one interview with a conservative, General Mauricio Vargas, another signer of the Peace Accords, who described Romero saying,

His role was that of a pastor. I think in the moment there was not enough understanding of the message that Monseñor Romero spoke. I don't mind saying today that there were also some who made use of his preaching, of his homilies to

⁹⁶ Interview, Eduardo Linares. July 26, 2010

⁹⁷ Interview, Violeta Menjívar. August 8, 2010

⁹⁸ Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010

⁹⁹ Interview, Dagoberto Gutierrez. July 19, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Ana Guadalupe Martínez. July 21, 2010.

further their political perspectives... but this does not mean that he was a Marxist... he just preached the church's social doctrine.¹⁰¹

Though there are some Salvadorans such as conservative television host Alfredo Mena Lagos who still vociferously claim that Romero is held up without merit, all of the rest of my interviewees at least begrudgingly accepted the importance of his role as a speaker and the impact on his death. Again, quoting from my interview with General Mauricio Vargas, “[Romero]’s death was a very harsh blow because no one in their right mind could accept that this could be done to someone in any society. I think that the brutal way in which he died was not acceptable from any point of view.” In this sense, people across most of the political spectrum speak to Romero’s key role in the conflict, and recognize his death as emblematic of the extreme violence that reached its apex in the early 1980s.

This dual narrative of Romero as the voice of the voiceless, and as a non-partisan moral/spiritual guide is not only spoken about, but is also activated through public acts and spaces. Constructing Romero as a universal, unifying figure is a project that the FMLN is actively engaged in through acts such as publicly commemorating his assassination, and building structures in his honor. Though there are numerous examples of the ways and moments in which Romero is remembered and invoked, here I will discuss the 2002 erection of a statue to the archbishop, as well as his invocation by current president Mauricio Funes in his 2009 inauguration speech. And though perhaps ARENA, as a conservative party whose founder is accused of ordering Romero’s assassination, may not join in actively celebrating him, their silent allowance and acceptance of such acts renders them tacit in his promotion as a unifying national figure.

¹⁰¹ Interview, Mauricio Vargas. July 19, 2010.

On March 24, 2002, exactly twenty-two years after Archbishop Romero's assassination, the Catholic church and the FMLN joined together to build a statue of him in the capital city.¹⁰² The monument, pictured in Figure 3.2, is a head-to-toe likeness of the cleric made of copper that stands on a concrete pedestal reading,

¡Qué bien responden los pueblos cuando se les sabe amar!
-Monseñor Romero, 21 de enero 1980
XXII Aniversario de su Martirio, 1980-2002
San Salvador 24 de marzo del 2002

which can be loosely translated as “How well do the peoples of the world respond when they are shown love!” It was built during Hector Silva's time as mayor of San Salvador, the second in a series of four FMLN mayors who held the position from 1994 to 2009.

However, the most important attribute of this statue is not its size or its inscription, which promotes love and universal brotherhood. Rather, its location in the heart of San Salvador, at the intersection of Boulevard Constitución and Alameda Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the shadow of the Salvador del Mundo monument highlights the importance of this symbol. The centrality of Romero's statue, next to the city's main plaza, reinforces the message that Romero belongs as a centerpiece of Salvadoran history. The fact that the erection of this statue was allowed in such a pivotal public space indicates his high degree of public acceptance as a national figure.

The Salvador del Mundo monument, a likeness of Christ standing atop the world, is the most important national monument because it represents El Salvador as a nation.¹⁰³ It is also significant that Romero stands directly under the gaze of Christ, in a position that suggests his symbolic status as a man near to God. Since Romero has been in consideration for full

¹⁰² Spanish, Francisco Mejía, “Erigen estatua en memoria de Mons. Romero,” *El Diario de Hoy*, March 24, 2002. (<http://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/2002/3/24/nacional/nacio13.html>).

¹⁰³ El Salvador's full official name is “El Salvador del Mundo” which directly translates as “The Savior of the World.” The statue of Christ asserts the country's status as a Christian nation.

canonization by the Vatican since 2000,¹⁰⁴ it makes sense that he would be placed in the position of a saint, just beneath Christ. This reinforces the narrative of Romero as a universal, Christian, moral guide, practically akin to Jesus himself. Equating Romero with Christianity also pressures conservative sectors, which often define themselves as upholding Catholic values, to accept him as a religious, rather than a politicized, figure.



Figure 3.2¹⁰⁵

This narrative is further reinforced by those in the FMLN who invoke Romero during political moments. One outstanding invocation occurred on June 1st, 2009, during the presidential inauguration address of the FMLN's Mauricio Funes. About half way through his first speech to the nation as president, Funes stated that:

Our faith, our ethics, and our philosophy are not enough by themselves, they are empty if we do not apply them concretely to the actions of our government. For this reason, governing well is the maximum expression of commitment to our people, and to the memory of Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, my teacher and the spiritual guide of this nation.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ "Salvadoran bishops write Vatican to support Romero's sainthood," *Catholic News Service* (<http://www.uscatholic.org/news/2010/02/salvadoran-bishops-write-vatican-support-romeros-sainthood>).

¹⁰⁵ <http://v19.lscache1.c.bigcache.googleapis.com/static.panoramio.com/photos/original/906907.jpg>

¹⁰⁶ Spanish, Mauricio Funes, "Discurso, Toma de Posesión, 1 de junio de 2009," <http://salvapress.wordpress.com/2009/06/01/presidente-mauricio-funes/> (April 2, 2011).

Here, Funes calls upon the narrative trope of Romero as a transcendent, universal moral leader, on the grounds of his spiritual authority. Seeing such a reference in one of the most important public declarations of 2009, without provoking significant backlash, is once again an indication that Romero is in the process of being an acceptable historical reference, despite having been a contested public figure.

Both the tropes of Romero as (a) the voice of the voiceless, and (b) as a transcendent spiritual guide are perpetuated through narratives shared in private, such as my interviews, and simultaneously promoted through articulations and actions that occur in the public sphere. Even if it is principally the FMLN and their sympathizers who invoke Romero using these tropes, they are increasingly joined by moderates such as General Mauricio Vargas, and supported by the silence of the right-wing. There is not an active, widely accepted narrative that defends Romero's assassination, in comparison with the polarizing figures described in the previous chapter. Most will at least admit that Romero's killing was an excessive war-time atrocity. Increasing numbers of young people are growing up surrounded by a positive image and narrative of Romero. This portrayal of a godly man, shot down while speaking for the voiceless, emphasizes the war as a moment of indefensible madness, recognized in hindsight as such with Romero as the central martyr in this potentially unifying narrative.

Commander Schafik Jorge Handal

"Can Schafik become a great unifying myth? I think so." –Prof. Ricardo Ribera

"He is a symbol that, like to or not, serves as a reference for new generations... he is a role model." –Gen. Mauricio Vargas

Schafik Jorge Handal was born to Palestinian immigrants in 1930, and began participating in anti-dictatorial protests at the age of thirteen. He continued his role as an activist throughout his time as a law student at the National University of El Salvador, as an advocate for

increased university autonomy as well as constitutional reform. His vocal role in these activities led to his expulsion from the country at the age of twenty-one, and when he returned five years later, he ascended the ranks of the clandestine Communist Party (PCES) to become the Secretary General in 1956. This led to his brief exile once more in 1960, and when he returned a few months later, he resumed his activities as part of the PCES leadership. He was once again selected as Secretary General in 1973, and he held that position throughout the conflict, until 1994.¹⁰⁷

During the 1970s, the PCES split following disagreements between Handal and fellow communist leader Salvador Cayetano Carpio over whether there were still non-violent avenues to pursue in order to prevent a civil war, or whether the moment had arrived for an armed revolution. Carpio's strong belief in taking up arms in order to fight the state-sponsored repression led him to form the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), and thus began the fragmentation of the left that led to the eventual creation of the ERP, the PRTC, and the RN.¹⁰⁸ Handal and the PCES continued to engage mainly in legal electoral and trade union organizing. However, as the repression worsened and non-violent means of resistance did not yield results, the PCES eventually joined the other four main guerrilla organizations in forming the FMLN, though they were one of last factions to do so.¹⁰⁹

During the conflict, each of the guerrilla organizations chose a leader to represent them in the General Command. Handal served as the PCES General Commander throughout the war under the nom de guerre Simón, alongside Salvador Sánchez Cerén (nom de guerre Leonel González) of the FPL, Eduardo Sancho (nom de guerre Fermán Cienfuegos) of the RN,

¹⁰⁷ Spanish, Instituto Schafik Handal, *Biografía*, <http://schafik.org/biografia.html> (April 11, 2011).

¹⁰⁸ These organizations splintered off from one another because of differences in ideology and approach to the revolution.

¹⁰⁹ Hudson, 237-239.

Francisco Jovel (nom de guerre Roberto Roca) of the PRTC, and René Cruz (nom de guerre Joaquín Villalobos) of the ERP.¹¹⁰ Of the five factions, the PCES was among the smallest, with the ERP and the FPL leading in both numbers of supporters and in prominence because of their military victories in the departments of Chalatenango and Morazán that gained “liberated territories” for the guerrillas. The PCS fought primarily in the departments of San Salvador and Cuscatlán.¹¹¹

In the final months of 1989, the ARENA government of President Alfredo Cristiani and the FMLN General Command independently sought the help of United Nations Secretary General Javier Pérez de Célar to find a resolution to the conflict.¹¹² The negotiations resulted in a series of accords between July 1990 and January 1992 that pieced together a framework for ending the armed conflict and rebuilding a post-war El Salvador. Schafik Handal was one of the leaders of the negotiation process, and signed each of the six different accords that were drafted in those final eighteen months of the conflict. He was present throughout the negotiations, played an active part in the dialogue, and is one of the sixteen signers of the final accord.¹¹³

In the 1990s, Handal served as the first General Coordinator of the FMLN, and oversaw the transition of guerrilla organization into a political party.¹¹⁴ He then served as the representative for the department of San Salvador¹¹⁵ to the National Legislative Assembly from 1997 until his death in 2006, during which time he continued to be a vocal advocate for the rights of his poorest constituents. He was also opposed to many initiatives taken up by ARENA, particularly the implementation of neo-liberal economic models that rewarded corporate

¹¹⁰ Hudson, 237-239.

¹¹¹ Spanish, Marxists Internet Archive, *El Salvador: Guerra Revolucionaria, 1980-1992*, <http://www.marxists.org/espanol/tematica/elsalvador/archivo/index.htm> (April 12, 2011).

¹¹² Spanish, Óscar Martínez Peñate, ed., *El Salvador: Los acuerdos de paz y el informe de la comisión de la verdad* (San Salvador: Editorial Nuevo Enfoque), 2007, (11).

¹¹³ Peñate, 100.

¹¹⁴ <http://schafik.org/biografia2.html>

¹¹⁵ El Salvador is divided into fourteen states, called departments.

investment,¹¹⁶ as well as the decision to support the United States by sending Salvadoran troops to Iraq as part of operation “Iraqi Freedom.”¹¹⁷

In the final stage of his long political career, Handal ran for president in 2004. He lost to his ARENA opponent, Tony Saca, a businessman, but won over 812,000 votes,¹¹⁸ an unprecedented number of FMLN supporters in a country of fewer than 6 million people. In 2005 he was chosen by the FMLN to represent El Salvador in the first Central American Parliament (PARLACEN).¹¹⁹ On January 24, 2006 Handal died of a heart-attack in the San Salvador airport upon returning from the inauguration of Bolivian president Evo Morales. Today, his face adorns FMLN banners, the party’s website, and the newly built monument in the suburb in Mejicanos. With time, he has become the political face of the FMLN, and is invoked as a founding father.

Of the four figures discussed in this project, Handal is the most recently deceased, and therefore his legacy and mythology have had the least time to ruminate. However, I was surprised to find that my interviews yielded a generally unified narrative of who Handal was, and what he means today. In fact, discussions of the commander were the most uniform of any of the figures and centered around two aspects: firstly, interviewees described Handal’s role in negotiating the peace process as crucial to reaching a resolution to the conflict, and secondly he is considered by both his friends and adversaries to have been a consistent, honest and respectable politician. Both of these aspects are tied to his commitment to democracy, which is his outstanding hallmark and the root of his ability to be invoked, despite his contentious past, as a unifying figure.

¹¹⁶ Michael Soller, “We Don’t (Love) Stinkin’ Yankee Running Dog Warmongers,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2005 (<http://articles.latimes.com/2005/feb/20/opinion/op-anti20>).

¹¹⁷ Spanish, Ivo Príamo Alvarenga, “Tenebroas ridícula y cínica baladronada de Schafik,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, August 31, 2005 (<http://www.elsalvador.org/Embajadas/eeuu/Prensa2.nsf/aac7d56ca8fd884b852563be00610639/404c5ed86e8bf2a98525706e006c4a6c?OpenDocument>).

¹¹⁸ <http://schafik.org/biografia3.html>

¹¹⁹ <http://schafik.org/biografia3.html>

Ten interviewees discussed Handal with me, and I have also incorporate quotes from Gen. Orlando Zepeda's book, *Perfiles de la Guerra* (Profiles of the War)¹²⁰ and the military history book *En Defensa de la Patria* (In Defense of the Fatherland)¹²¹ to show that these tropes even appear in the most conservative of military histories. It is also important to note the personal connections that several of the interviewees had with Handal. This is particularly true in the case of four interviewees, General Mauricio Vargas, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Nidia Diaz and Dagoberto Gutierrez, who were all were fellow negotiators during of the peace process. This undoubtedly affected the salience of Handal's role as a negotiator in their minds, and may have led to a disproportionate overrepresentation in my interview materials. I also conducted an extensive interview with Handal's son, legislative representative Jorge Schafik Handal Vega, who is currently a leading FMLN politician and the party's projected candidate for the 2012 mayorial race of San Salvador. His role in the party may also have an effect on his father's prominence as an icon.

The first narrative trope, Handal as a key negotiator, is articulated in the following quotes by fellow members and sympathizers of the left. For instance, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, a former ERP guerrilla and current head of the Museum of the Word and the Image in San Salvador described him, saying:

Schafik Handal is the protagonist of the peace process... He plays a very big role in the negotiation process despite his very explosive demeanor. In politics, he was a man that built a lot of bridges and negotiated with the right wing."¹²²

This was echoed by Gerson Martínez, a former FPL guerrilla and current Minister of the Interior for the FMLN government of President Funes:

¹²⁰ Spanish, General Juan Orlando Zepeda Herrera. *Perfiles de la guerra en El Salvador*. (San Salvador, El Salvador: NewGraphics, 2008).

¹²¹ Spanish, General Humberto Corado Figueroa, *En defensa de la patria: Historia del conflicto armado en El Salvador, 1989-1992* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Tecnoimpresas, 2008).

¹²² Interview, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi. July 19, 2010.

That was Schafik [Handal], a man who sought a democratic means for change, that's how I see him... For the right wing the diplomatic option did not exist. Schafik [Handal] is the one that supported dialogue the most; he was one of the main intellectual elements in the design of the political solution of the conflict.¹²³

These quotes highlight Handal's leadership during the peace process, and how, out of all of the accomplishments throughout his life, it was this role that was most historically outstanding.

Handal's role as peacemaker and pursuer of democracy has come to be his superceding identifying characteristic. Not only is his role as a negotiator considered his primary accomplishment, these two quotes also indicate that, compared to the rest of those involved in the reconciliation he was "the protagonist" and "the one that supported dialogue the most." It has become his supreme accomplishment in part because he is considered to have led the FMLN out of the armed conflict.

Both Nidia Díaz, a former PRTC guerrilla and current Salvadoran representative of the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), and General Mauricio Vargas discussed Handal in very personal terms, highlighting the extensive contact they had with him during the peace talks. Díaz described his meticulous examination methods and fierce style of debate, saying:

Once I started working more directly in the peace negotiations... we practically spent two years in direct contact, living in the same place. And his methods were incredible; he was very diligent, not even a comma slipped by Schafik [Handal] during the negotiations. He was so committed to protecting the interests of the people. We saw his passionate determination not to give in, and his unwaivering firmness in the face of the enemy. It was an incredible negotiation.¹²⁴

Similarly, General Mauricio Vargas, who sat across the negotiating table from both Handal and Díaz, described his impressions of Handal during the negotiations:

Schafik [Handal] played a very important leadership role. He was a very charismatic person. Always defending what he really believed in... I got to really talk to Schafik during the peace negotiations, it lasted 28 months and three days, so I think I can speak to the way he was. He was a faithful believer and defended

¹²³ Interview, Gerson Martínez. July 21, 2010

¹²⁴ Interview, Nidia Diaz. August 9, 2010.

what was his, be it correct or incorrect, tooth and nail. He definitely played a determinant role in the peace negotiations.¹²⁵

The other two co-signers of the Peace Accord that I interviewed did not directly reference their personal contact with Handal. However, they still considered his role in the negotiations to be a key characteristic in their descriptions. Dagoberto Gutierrez, a fellow member of the PCES, and current professor of Philosophy at the Lutheran University of El Salvador described him as,

...a man with a great sense of humor, a big joker, simple as that, even though he had an angry face. He was much more than that, a declared communist, which in this country was a thing of life and death... He had a very important role in ending the Civil War via negotiations. He played an important part in forming FMLN, he was a very efficient official and a good presidential candidate.¹²⁶

The most critical voice out of all my interviewees came from former ERP guerrilla Ana Guadalupe Martínez. After the war, she left the FMLN and joined the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (Democratic Christian Party or PDC), a party that was in power during the conflict, after the 1984 elections when José Napoleón Duarte was elected president. However, most analysts today consider those elections to have been largely discredited due to a widespread boycott of the elections, as well as possible fraud. Throughout her interview, regardless of the questions asked, Martínez turned the conversation around in order to repeatedly reference Duarte as the father of democracy, and as a victim of history, unfairly preempted by Handal:

I think [Handal] is replacing Jose Napoleon Duarte who was the real icon of the time, who truly represents the system's reform, the struggle for democracy and social justice... [Handal] never sought to raise awareness or provide structure or leadership to the guerrilla. He was an important figure as head of the commission that took part in the peace negotiations... even though I knew Schafik [Handal] personally I think that the main figure for democratic foundation of the country was Jose Napoleon Duarte.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Interview, General Mauricio Vargas. July 19, 2010.

¹²⁶ Interview, Dagoberto Gutierrez. July 19, 2010.

¹²⁷ Interview, Ana Guadalupe Martínez. July 21, 2010.

Despite her overall critique of Handal as a leader both during and after the war, the only positive thing she says about him concerns his role as a negotiator in the peace process. The reference to Handal's leadership during the negotiations continues to stand out as one key to understanding his legacy. This can also be seen in the following quote from the military textbook *In Defense of the Fatherland* (*En Defensa de la Patria*):

After the failure of the terrorist offensives of November 1989 and 1990... Handal spearheaded a move towards dialogue in order to reach an accord, which would allow a dignified end to the guerrilla misadventure. It was this process that eventually yielded the Peace Agreements.¹²⁸

Both of the latter two quotes are critical overall of either Handal specifically (Martínez) or of the FMLN in general (the textbook). However, amidst these negative portrayals, both quotes cite Handal's status as "an important figure as the head of the commission that took part in the peace negotiations" and as the leader willing to "spearhead" a "move towards dialogue in order to reach an accord." Handal is specifically identified with this moment of leadership that garnered him respect from across the political spectrum, even from those with whom he had fundamental ideological disagreements or who disliked him personally.

The second fundamental trope that is utilized in describing Schafik Handal is of his consistency, perseverance and honesty as a politician in the post-war era. His son, FMLN congressman Jorge Schafik Handal best sums up this sentiment:

Schafik [Handal] becomes what every leftist politician should be, honest, loyal to his principles, consistent, perseverant, with integrity and confidence in the people... He is very respected by his enemies.¹²⁹

This was echoed by other members of the FMLN, such as former FPL guerrilla and Minister of the Interior Gerson Martínez who stated that, "even people who didn't completely agree with his ideas have a great respect for him. I have great respect for him, most of all

¹²⁸ Corado, 202.

¹²⁹ Interview, Jorge Schafik Handal Vega. July 19, 2010.

towards his perseverance.”¹³⁰ Similarly, fellow peace negotiator and former PRTC guerrilla Nidia Díaz expressed that, “I respected Schafik [Handal] very much, his courage to say things as they were. If he said “no” it meant no, if he said “yes” he meant yes. And he contributed so much to [the FMLN’s] beliefs, he was a great leader.”¹³¹ In addition to being respected for his perseverance, Ricardo Ribera, professor of philosophy at the Universidad Centroamericana commented that, “people say that [Handal] could have been mistaken, but not corrupt. He was incorruptible.”¹³²

These positive evaluations of character were also shared by his political and ideological adversaries. The best example of this is the following quote from Alfredo Mena Lagos, a conservative talk-show host and founding member of ARENA, who described Handal saying,

Schafik [Handal] rubbed me the right way. Even though I didn’t agree with him, he was honest. I would always joke with him that he was ‘honestly mistaken.’ As someone who is proudly right-wing, I got along very well with him. He kept his word, one could chat with him. Of course he was a product of his childhood and his adolescence but he was a democratic leader who could have done a lot of good.¹³³

Similarly, General Mauricio Vargas, a fellow participant in the peace negotiations, said of Handal that, “Schafik [Handal]... was the type of guy who defended what he believed in tooth and nail. He never wavered on absolutely anything. He was a faithful believer in what was his, right or wrong.”

If all of these quotes are considered together, a pattern emerges. Schafik Handal is indeed respected by his opponents, and revered by his party. His reputation is that of an honest, straightforward, and perseverant person in a time when many prominent politicians of all

¹³⁰ Interview, Gerson Martínez. July 21, 2010.

¹³¹ Interview, Nidia Díaz. August 11, 2010.

¹³² Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010.

¹³³ Interview, Alfredo Mena Lagos. August 12, 2010.

parties are accused of corruption. Though this trope is not articulated in one consistent way, it is still clear that Handal was known and respected for his conduct and character.

The two overarching narrative trends about Schafik Handal are his importance as a negotiator during the time of the peace accords, and his stature as a respectable and honest politician. As both of these are positive, it is not hard to understand why Handal would be privately revered by those who knew him. However, the degree of prominence that Handal has attained rivals only that of Farabundo Martí, the 1932 martyr and namesake of the FMLN party. For instance, Handal's face is used in much official FMLN propaganda and publications, including the main page of the party's website, where he appears alongside Martí (depicted in Figure 3.4). Also, the party inaugurated a monument in his honor, in San Salvador, on the 24th of January of 2011, on the fifth anniversary of his death, shown in Figure 3.5. These are just two examples of the many ways that Handal is invoked by the FMLN, but they are some of the most prominent, and very publicly link Handal with the party that he helped to found.



Figure 3.4¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Screen shot of the official FMLN website, <http://www.fmln.org.sv>, April 14, 2011. Handal is featured in the permanent banner at the top of the page, with 1932 leader Farabundo Martí to his right.

The use of Handal's likeness on the FMLN website shows his increased invocation as a unifying symbol within the party, though not necessarily beyond. However, this is important because the FMLN has been historically fragmented, in particular after the war officially ended and there was much disagreement about the course that the FMLN should take as a political party rather than a guerrilla organization. Though the various factions that made up the FMLN during the conflict have officially been dissolved, the fragmentation remains present. Therefore, Handal's rise as a symbolic head of the party is particularly fascinating because of his leadership role within the PCES.

While some question why Handal would be chosen as the new face of the FMLN when he was not the most prominent figure during the war, Professor Ricardo Ribera of the UCA offers a logical explanation:

Death allows for this kind of myth to grow and it's pretty clear that at [the] moment [of his death] the FMLN needed a myth, an icon... it was pretty wise of him to die with such good timing, he had just been defeated in the elections; he was a founder of the party but he didn't lead any of the main factions... what merits did he have? His ideological consistency, more so than any of the others in the General Command... I think that the left, as a democratic left rather than a revolutionary left, needs a figure like him.¹³⁵

It is true that Handal is the first of the five members who made up the FMLN General Command during the war to pass away, and perhaps if another leader of equal prominence had died first, Handal's role may have been filled by someone else. However, the myth of Schafik Handal is special because it can be framed as one that celebrates both peace and democracy, through the tropes of his role as a negotiator and as an honest politician. The FMLN as a political party would like to associate itself with both peace and democracy in the minds of voters, because these are two powerful ideas that have the capacity to bridge a divided society. For this reason,

¹³⁵ Interview, Ricardo Ribera. August 9, 2010.

the FMLN invests in the long-term preservation of Handal's memory, as demonstrated in the recently erected monument in his honor.



Figure 3.5¹³⁶

This monument, built just outside of San Salvador in the suburb of Majicanos to commemorate the fifth year anniversary of Handal's death, has three important parts: the central pillar topped with the FMLN's signature star; the likeness of Handal etched into the block on the pillar's left; and a quotation of Handal's on to the right that reads, "El Salvador should be a country worth living in, where all of us can have the opportunity to work, to see our children grow, to pursue progress, and to live securely and with DIGNITY." These three aspects highlight Handal as a figure primarily associated with the FMLN, but who holds universal values about human dignity. As in the case of Archbishop Romero's monument, the ability for this project to go forward, especially so soon after Handal's death, is an indication of a general level of acceptance of Handal as an important historical figure.

¹³⁶ Design of the monument to Handal, inaugurated on January 24, 2011 on the fifth anniversary of his death. Image from <http://www.fmln.org.sv>.

In conclusion, my supplemented interview data revealed unified narratives, or consistent ways of describing and interpreting Archbishop Oscar Romero and Commander Schafik Handal. Romero is commonly hailed as the voice of the voiceless, and as a universal moral and spiritual guide. Handal is discussed largely in terms of his role as a negotiator during the peace process, and as an honest and perseverant politician. All of these narrative trends are generally centered around positive attributes that can be palatable to people from across the political spectrum. For instance, by speaking out for the voiceless, Romero stands for bravery and justice, as well as being upheld as a righteous man because of his position in the church when he was assassinated. On the other hand, Handal represents a desire for peace through his role in the negotiations, as well as the ideal politician who is both firm in his beliefs and conducts himself honestly. Though there are undoubtedly those who criticize the rising prominence of both of these men, the ways they are invoked in public rhetoric and in public spaces demonstrates their continually expanding acceptance as historically important Salvadorans. Despite the fact that both of these figures are openly promoted more so by the political left than by the right, their growing acceptance indicates their potential to become increasingly unifying, as future generations who have not experienced the war internalize narratives about these figures such as the ones described in this chapter.

Conclusion

The four case studies discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 illustrate the special and complex results that a negotiated peace process can have on historical memory. In the post-war era, some historical figures, such as Colonel Monterrosa and Major d'Aubuisson are understood in competing, contradictory and polarizing ways. For instance, both of these figures are remembered by the right as heroes who fought to contain communist aggression, while the left considers them to be among the worst abusers of human rights during the war. Those figures that are divisive are remembered by some for their particular abilities, but tend to be tied to some war-time event or atrocity that cannot be denied or forgotten by their enemies. Thus, the competing narratives cannot be reconciled.

Others, such as Archbishop Romero and Commander Handal are emerging as figures who are understood in a more unified manner that can foster reconciliation. Romero is remembered as the voice of the voiceless, and as the nation's transcendent spiritual guide; Handal is lifted up as a protagonist of the peace process, and a model politician. Unifying figures are primarily remembered for their merits, which tend to be correlated with post-war values such as peace, democracy, and human rights. For instance both Romero and Handal are invoked as representations of the progress El Salvador has made since the 1980s and heralded as exemplary national icons.

In conclusion, the decision to incorporate all of the main warring factions into civil society has led to two main benefits: firstly, institutions such as political parties, the military, and the Catholic church are allowed to celebrate and perpetuate their own narratives of history without fearing state-sanctioned retribution. Each of the four figures discussed in previous chapters is upheld by his respective institution (and sometime by more than one, as in the case of

Archbishop Romero who is celebrated by both the church and the FMLN). Whether these narratives are unifying or polarizing, the ability for them to be expressed, written, and transmitted freely is a remarkable change from the way things were before the war. Secondly, a unifying reconciliation narrative is being constructed by a variety of institutions, rather than being controlled or imposed solely by the state. The involvement of multiple groups that represent the interests and voices of various sectors of society could eventually lead to a more inclusive understanding of the conflict that represents multiple experiences and perspectives, though a unified version of history is far from being a reality in El Salvador.

In future research, I hope to explore what other tropes and historical events are helping to foster national reconciliation and healing, for instance the narrative of democracy as a unifying national value, and the negotiations at the end of the war as a moment that symbolizes the beginning of peace. Though I saw evidence of both of these narrative tropes in my research, their inclusion would have gone beyond the scope of this project. The four case studies described here provide a glimpse into the processes occurring in El Salvador today to make sense of and remember some of the most difficult times in this small nation's history.

Appendix (a)

Acronym Directory

ARENA: *Alianza Republicana Nacionalist de El Salvador.*

Republican Nationalist Alliance of El Salvador. ARENA is the main conservative political party founded by Roberto d'Aubuisson in 1981. The party held the presidential office from 1989-2009.

FMLN: *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional.*

The Farbundo Martí Front for National Liberation. The FMLN was originally a guerrilla organization formed in 1980. It was composed of the ERP, FPL, PRTC, RN, and PCES factions. The FMLN became a political party in 1992 following the Peace Accords. In 2009, Mauricio Funes became the first FMLN candidate to win the presidency.

PCES: *Partido Comunista de El Salvador*

Communist Party of El Salvador

ERP: *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo*

The People's Revolutionary Army

FPL: *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación*

Popular Forces of Liberation

PRTC: *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Centroamericanos*

Revolutionary Party of Central-American Workers

RN: *Resistencia Nacional*

National Resistance

Appendix (b)

List of Interviewees

Violeta Menjivar (Interviewed August 8, 2010).

- Former member of the FPL.
- Provided medical care on the field.
- Former *diputada* (congressional representative).
- Current vice-minister of health.

Carlos Henriquez Consalvi (Interviewed July 19, 2010).

- Venezuelan left-wing sympathizer who went to El Salvador in 1979 to make a documentary, and joined the guerrilla movement for the remainder of the war.
- Former member of the ERP.
- Founder and director of *Radio Venceremos* (Radio We Shall Be Victorious).
- Founder and curator of *El Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen* (The Museum of the Word and the Image).

General Mauricio (Chato) Vargas (Interviewed July 19, 2010).

- Military officer.
- Participated in the peace talks and signed the Peace Accords.

Alfredo Mena Lagos (August 12, 2010).

- Founder of the Nationalist Party of El Salvador, which later was incorporated into ARENA.
- Descendant of landed oligarchy, today still owns coffee plantations.
- Lived in the US for 18 years.
- Host of the conservative radio and television program, *Pensando en Voz Alta* (thinking out loud).

Dagoberto Gutierrez (July 19, 2010).

- Former member of the PCES.
- Participated in the peace talks and signed the Peace Accords.
- Current vice-rector at the Lutheran University of El Salvador.

Zoila Milagro Navas (July 26, 2010).

- Has been the mayor of Antiguo Cusctlán, a wealthy suburb of San Salvador, for more than twenty years.
- A close personal friend of Roberto d'Aubuisson

Ana Guadalupe Martínez (July 21, 2010).

- Part of the ERP leadership during the war.
- After the war, broke with the FMLN
- Became a *diputada* (legislator) for the Partido Demócrata Cristiano, a party formed in the late 1960's and who were disenfranchised in the 1972 elections. Their leader, Napoleón Duarte was part of the 1979 junta that took power of the country, and he was elected

president (1984-1989). Today the PDC is one of the smaller political parties who participate mostly at a local and legislative level.

Gerson Martínez (July 21, 2010).

- Founding member of the FPL
- Currently Minister of Public Works

Jorge Schafik Handal Vega (July 19, 2010).

- Son of Schafik
- Now a *diputado* for the department of Usulután

Ricardo Ribera (August 9, 2010).

- Professor of Philosophy and Sociology at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA).

Nidia Díaz (August 11, 2010).

- Former PRTC guerrilla.
- Author of the internationally successful memoir *I was Never Alone* about her experience as a prisoner of war.
- Participant in the peace talks, and signer of the Peace Accord.
- Current member of the Cenral American Parlament (PARLACEN).

Eduardo Linares (July 26, 2010).

- Former FPL guerrilla.
- Current director of the Salvadoran State Intelligence Organization.

Ronaldo Cáceres (July 30, 2010).

- Former ERP guerrilla.
- Founder and curator of the *Museo de la Revolución* in Perquín, Morazán.

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